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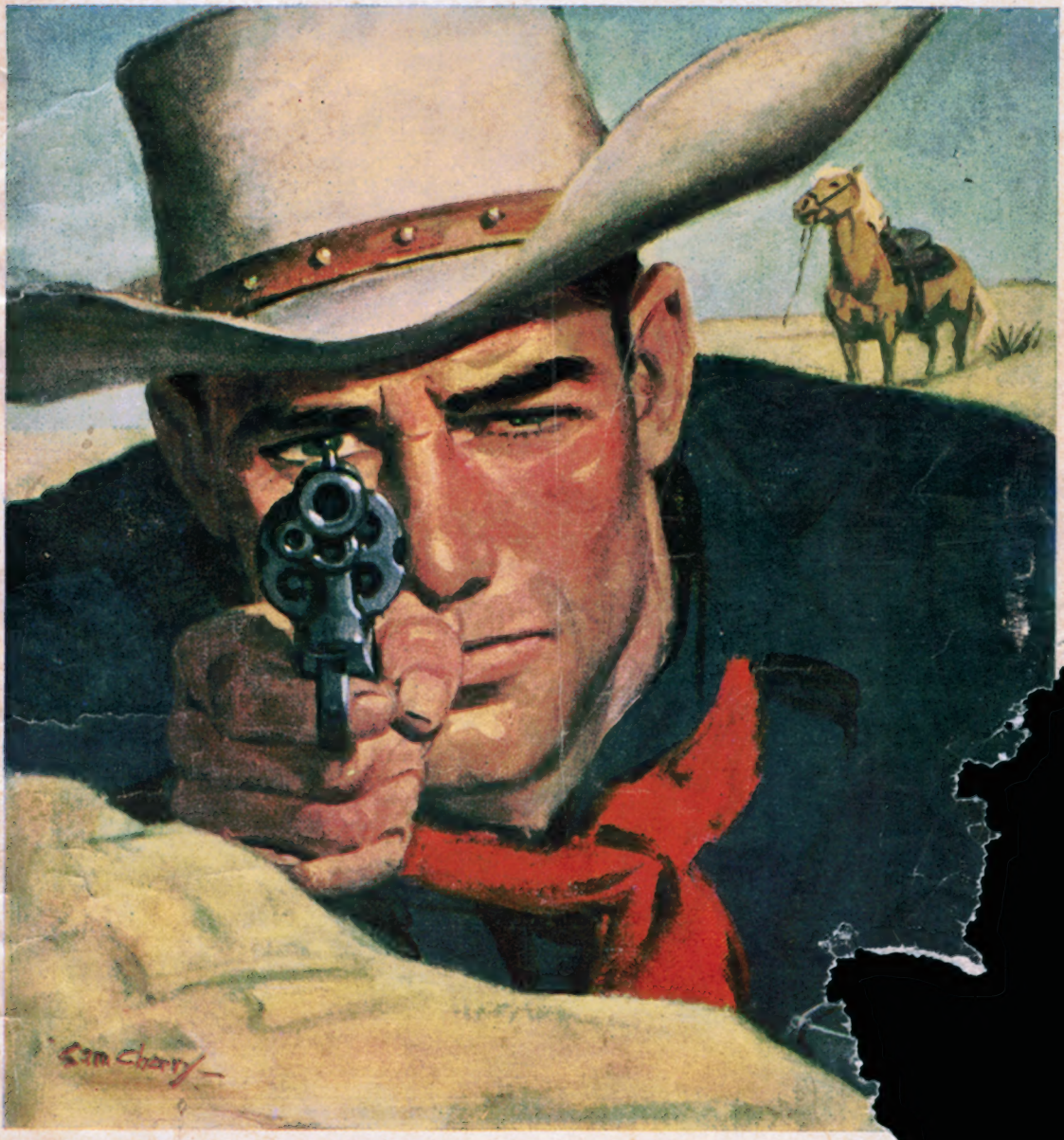

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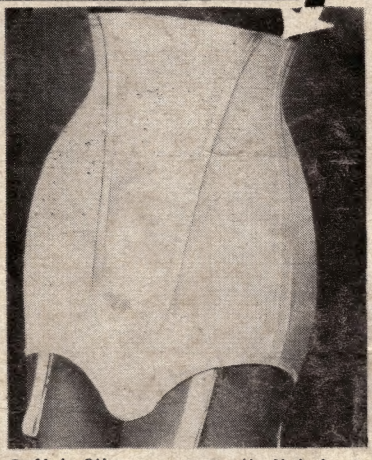

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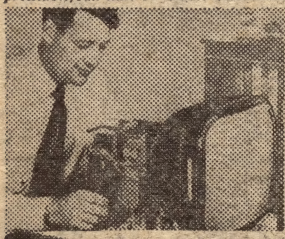

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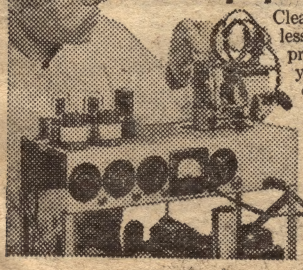

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TEXAS RANGERS

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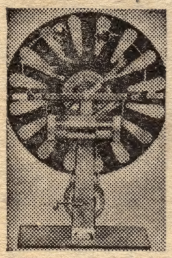

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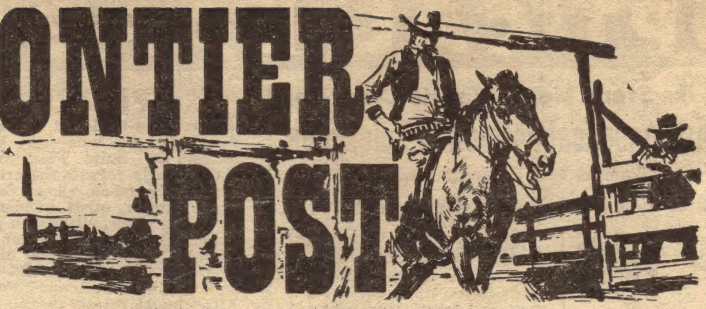

By CAPTAIN STARR

That Dirty Little Coward . . .

IN THE YEAR 1882, Widow Bolton lived in a two-story house on the east side of Richmond, Missouri. She was a sister of Charley and Bob Ford.

Several of the men connected with the James gang made a practice of hiding out at Widow Bolton's house. Among them were Bob and Charley Ford, Dick Liddle, Wood Hite and others. In the early part of March of that year, the Ford brothers and Dick Liddle were there.

Liddle had become infatuated with the charms of Mrs. Bolton. Some time later, Wood Hite, who had been in Tennessee, arrived at the Bolton residence and shortly it appeared to Liddle that Mrs. Bolton was entirely too friendly with Hite. So bitterness developed between Liddle and Hite who was a cousin to Jesse James.

As the days passed, the bitter jealousy became hatred between these two men. Several flareups between them almost led to gunplay.

Jesse Smells a Rat

One night Wood Hite went upstairs to bed, and while he slept, someone shot him through the head. He died instantly. The other men who were there wrapped his body in a horse blanket and threw it in an old abandoned well.

About a week after this happened, Jesse James rode up in the yard at the Bolton house. The Ford boys and Dick Liddle came out on the porch. Jesse sat on his horse, and they talked casually for some minutes.

"Where is Wood Hite?" Jesse asked, then.

Dick Liddle spoke up: "We don't know where he is. He took his horse and rode away a few days ago. Said he was going back to Tennessee."

Jesse looked straight at Dick and said, "Wood promised to meet me at a certain place two days ago. He didn't show up. He never failed me before. I want to tell you, Dick, that if anything has happened to Wood Hite, whoever done it will settle with me." With that warning Jesse spurred away.

Fateful Decision

His threat threw a panic in the Ford boys, and especially Liddle. They were aware that Jesse knew of the feud between Liddle and Hite, and they knew that Jesse would not stop until he uncovered the facts. They also knew that Jesse would keep his word about retaliation. Their backs were to the wall, and they made a dozen plans and abandoned them.

After long discussion they finally agreed there was only one way out. Dick Liddle would go to Jefferson City, give himself up and arrange with Governor Thomas Crittenden to kill Jesse James for the reward and a promise of amnesty for themselves.

Charley and Bob Ford immediately left for St. Joseph, where Jesse was living at the time on a high hill in the southeastern part of the city, and Liddle headed for

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

Jefferson City.

In a couple of days, when the Ford boys arrived at Jesse's house, he pointedly asked them where Dick Liddle was.

"I don't know," Bob said.

The following morning the Ford brothers went downtown early and bought the morning papers. Mrs. James had breakfast ready when they returned, so they sat down and handed the papers to Jesse.

It was evident the Ford brothers hadn't read the papers, for in blazing headlines, on the front page, was the announcement: "Dick Liddle in Jefferson City in conference with the Governor. Plans made for the capture of Jesse James."

Upon reading the headlines, Jesse looked across the table at Bob Ford. He said, "Young man, I thought you said you didn't know where Dick Liddle was." It was an extremely tense moment.

The Cowardly Kill

Zeralda James, wife of Jesse, told this writer years afterward of the happenings that morning.

She said, "After Jesse read those headlines and made the accusing remarks to Bob Ford, they all sat at the table for a few minutes. No one said a word. No one ate a bite. Then they all got up from the table and went into the front room. I remained in the kitchen.

"Jesse went on into a bedroom, and then did something I never knew him to do before. I still don't understand. He took off his belt and two guns, threw them on the bed, walked to the other end of the room, placed a chair under a picture on the wall, climbed on the chair and was straightening the picture with his back to the Ford boys.

"They both stepped to the bedroom door. Both drew their guns. One of them told later that Jesse turned his head slightly, as though he had heard the click of the hammer, before Bob Ford fired. The bullet entered his head from the back. Jesse fell from the chair, made a feeble effort to crawl toward the bed, then lay still. He was dead.

"The Ford boys ran out through the kitchen door, and as they ran Bob Ford hollered: 'Mrs. James, it was an accident.'"

Dick Liddle surrendered to Governor Crittenden and made his suggestion for the murder of Jesse James on March 29, five days before Jesse was shot.

Immortality for Jesse

Printed below are a few select lines from one of the most famous of American ballads, THE BALLAD OF JESSE JAMES. It is believed to have been written by a Negro convict, Billy Gashade, upon hearing the news that the outlaw had been shot. Positive authorship or the date it was written is not known.

Jesse James was a lad that killed many a man,
He robbed the Glendale train,
But that dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard,
Has laid poor Jesse in his grave.

It was Robert Ford, that dirty little coward,
I wonder how does he feel,
For he ate of Jesse's bread and slept in Jesse's bed,
And laid poor Jesse in his grave.

The people held their breath when they heard of Jesse's death,
And wondered how he ever came to die.
It was one of the gang called Little Robert Ford,
He shot poor Jesse on the sly.

This song was made by Billy Gashade,
As soon as the news did arrive.
He said there was no man with the law in his hand
Who could take Jesse James alive.

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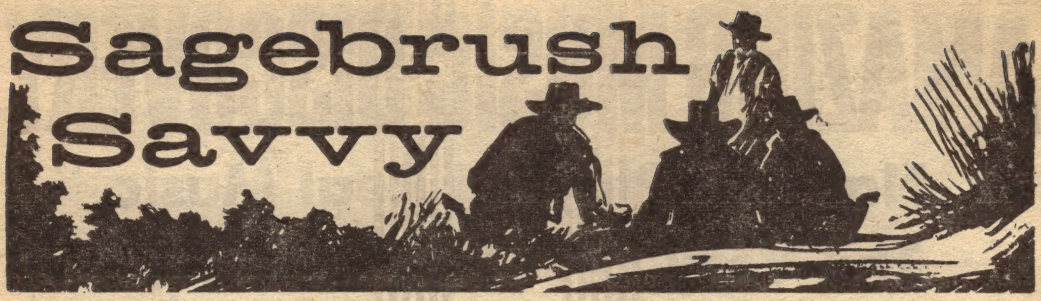
Sagebrush Savvy



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—How large is the Mexican population of New Mexico?—Ed V. (Miss.)

A.—It is estimated that around 375,000, or a little under half of the residents of New Mexico, are of Spanish or Mexican-Spanish descent. It is not correct, however, to call them Mexicans. Most of them are citizens of the United States, as their ancestors have been ever since General Kearny raised the Stars and Stripes over New Mexico in 1846. Thus they are not immigrants from Mexico but were already here when the U.S. took over. Probably the most correct designation would be "Mexican-Americans," since their forebears were citizens of Mexico *after* they were citizens of Spain. But they prefer to be called "Spanish-Americans," as distinguished from citizens not of Spanish blood, usually called "Anglos." Most of them speak both Spanish and English, and they pretty well match up with Anglo-Americans in education and accomplishments. Many are top-hand cowboys and peace officers, state and county officials, and they all love politics. One New Mexico Senator and one Congressman are Spanish-Americans. Percentage-wise, more Spanish-American soldiers were cited for heroism in World War II and in Korea than any other so-called national group in the Armed Forces. There are also a few thousand real Mexicans—citizens of Mexico—living in New Mexico.

Q.—What are the cards in "The Dead Man's Hand?"—A.J.K. (Minn.)

A.—A poker hand with a pair of aces and pair of eights is sometimes called The Dead Man's Hand in the West. This is said to be the hand held by Wild Bill Hickok when shot and killed by Jack McCall in Deadwood, S.D.

Q.—Is a dally a half hitch or just any turn of the rope around the saddlehorn?—G.R.L. (N.Y.)

A.—Any turn of the cowboy's end of a catch rope around the saddlehorn to hold against the pull of a roped animal is a dally, but of course it is usually a half hitch. Additional turns on top of a half hitch to prevent slipping are also called dallies. The word dally comes from the Spanish phrase *dale vuelta* (DAH-lay VWELL-tah), meaning "give it a turn" or "twist." A lot more cowhands tie the home end of the rope fast to the horn than take their dallies. This Texas tie-fast style is standard in rodeo roping.

Q.—What and where was the Taos Trail?—P.D. (Calif.)

A.—Southwest of Ratón Pass in northern New Mexico a branch forked off from the old Santa Fé Trail, went up the Cimarrón Canyon and over the mountains to Taos. This branch trail was also a part of the route commonly traveled by trappers, traders and others between Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River and Taos (pronounced to rhyme with house), New Mexico. Both these routes were often called the Taos Trail. The Cimarrón Canyon portion is now U.S. Highway 64.

—S. Omar Barker

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I ALWAYS felt simply "run down." People were thinking of me as a "spoil-sport." I didn't know why until my doctor put me wise. He told me that I acted like a man much older than myself . . . and explained *why* I felt "tired" . . . *why* my youthful vigor was slipping away . . . *why* my wife and family were beginning to think of me as a worn-out man.

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HOTEL

Rendezvous at Quito

A Jim Hatfield Novel **By Jackson Cole**

The Lone Wolf had to find a killer and two-thirds of a map to buried loot

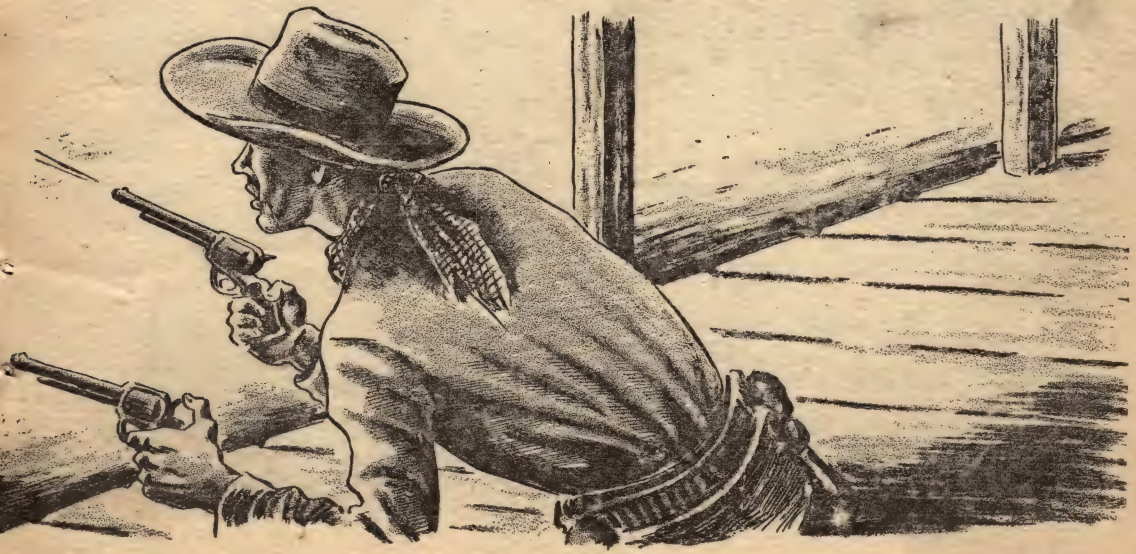
CHAPTER I

Reunion

TEN YEARS had not changed Quito, Cory thought. But they had changed him. He felt their dreary passage weigh on him as he stepped down from the spring wagon and turned to pay the thin-lipped man who had brought him to this badlands town from Caldwell.

"Ten dollars," the man said and took the bill Cory handed him without expression.

Cory stood in the dust of the wide street with the high sun beating down on him. He was a tall, round-shouldered man only vaguely conscious of the curious stares of the loafers on the hotel veranda. A hundred yards up or down the dusty road from



the hotel and a man was out of Quito—the heat lay in shimmering waves over the sage flats surrounding the town.

Cory was facing northwest and his gaze sought out the dark-blue bulk of a butte in the badlands. Behind that wind-shaped bulk the badlands ran into the high desert country of New Mexico. He remembered that dry, eroded land with a clarity undimmed by ten years.

Rocky Callahan had died there, and the limping blond kid from Taos, Voss Grant. They were buried there, along with one hundred thousand dollars!

Of the five men who had held up the crack express train that night, ten years ago, there were only three left. Matt Singleton, Oley Jones and himself, Cory Bates. Three men who had agreed to meet here in Quinto, ten years later. . . .

The lines in Cory's face were deep drawn and impatience had left its mark in him—he was not yet thirty but he looked older. For eight of the ten years he had lived a life, he had served as an indifferent deputy sheriff of Tolliver County that long.

The remembrance made him feel uneasy now. He had hidden behind that deputy's badge, waiting for this moment—waiting for this rendezvous at Quito. Ten years of living a lie, of not living at all. Of waiting for time to go by so he could come back here to claim his share of that one hundred thousand dollars.

Had it been worth it? Ten years of his life for less than $35,000. As he stood by the rickety two story frame hotel, he wasn't sure.

He was conscious now of the watchers on the veranda, of the creaking cane-bottom rocker in which a paunchy, thick-shouldered Mexican sprawled. Cory let his glance run along these men, but he did not find the faces he sought. He wondered if Oley and Matt were already here.

They had separated at this very spot in front of the hotel, each man riding his own particular trail.

"We'll meet right here, ten years to the day," Oley had said. He was a small, wiry man then, his spade beard gray-shot, his eyes a bright agate blue. He had been the leader of the gang, older and more experienced—and the deadliest with a hip gun.

Cory remembered that he and Matt had been the youngest of the bunch, younger even than Voss Grant by a year. Two wild, footloose kids who had run across Oley and the others and thrown in with them on that holdup out of bravado.

He and Matt had readily agreed to the rendezvous. Each of them had their portion of the map which located the loot they had buried in the badlands west of that butte.

"We'll lie low until things cool off," Oley had said. "Ten years. The holdup will have been forgotten by then. We'll come back here, if we're still alive, and get the money together."

It had sounded all right to Cory and Matt. They had a drink together in the Aces High Saloon that stood across the street. Cory turned now and saw that it was still in business, although the sign over the false front had faded to unreadability and Cory wondered if the paunchy bartender with the mole on his nose was still serving.

Oley Jones had left Quito first. Matt and he had watched the slight, dusty figure ride south, then they had parted, a little self-consciously, at the saloon tie-rack.

"Keep healthy, kid," Matt had said with a grin on his face. He was four months older than Cory. "See you in ten years."

Now, as he stood in front of the hotel steps, the old ghosts came crowding around Bates. Rocky Callahan with the twitchy lower lip and the itchy gun hand. Callahan had picked up a slug through his lung at the holdup and died on the way across the badlands. Voss Grant, the thin, blond kid from Taos had come through without a scratch—only to be kicked to death by his hammerheaded roan, the last night out.

"I knew it would happen," Oley had said with callous indifference. "Voss was mean to the bronc, he took his moods out

on the cayuse." He had pointed to the ugly spur scars on the animal's withers, the old welted ridges on the roan's rump. "Liked to use his knife on the bronc," Oley had growled, "when he felt bad."

Oley had shot the roan and left it beside Voss's grave. That was when the slight man had decided to bury the money.

"We'll do it fair," he had said. "We'll bury it here and come back for it when the half dozen posses on our tail quit lookin'. It's a heap of money," he had said, his eyes glinting avariciously. "We'll give 'em a lot of time to forget it. Ten years!" He had scowled at the dubious look on Matt's face.

"Look at it like we're putting the money in a bank," he said. "Ten years from now we come back and split it—thirty-three thousand apiece. It'll be nice to think about for the next ten years, won't it?"

"What's to stop any one of us from coming back before then and gettin' it all?" Matt had questioned bluntly.

Oley had grinned, showing crooked yellow teeth. There was something of the ferret in his smile, in his way of thinking.

"Not if we do it my way," he said. "It'll take all three of us to find where we'll buy it. All three of us!" he had repeated.

His plan seemed foolproof. They had drawn straws to see who would start it off. Cory had won. Matt and Oley had their bandannas bound tightly over their eyes, while Cory, with the money bags across his saddle, led their two mounts.

From their starting point, a wide, sandy wash backed by a sandstone cliff, Cory had headed into the eroded badlands. He had drawn his part of the map in detail, up to where he stopped and Matt had taken over. The procedure had been the same. Matt had started his map where Cory had left off—the last leg had fallen to Oley, who had buried the saddle bags with Matt and Cory standing by, blindfolded.

Oley had then blindfolded himself; all three of them had let their horses drift. When they took off their blindfolds at an agreed-upon signal, they found themselves lost in the country north of the big butte that had been their landmark since morning.

It had taken them the remainder of the day to finally make Quito.

I know where to start, Cory thought, staring into the hazy distance. But Matt will have to take on from where my map ends. And only Oley can find the spot where he buried the money.

JIM HATFIELD

HE SIGHED then and picked up his bag and walked up the rickety steps to the sagging hotel veranda and paused in front of the door. The westering sun reached under the wooden awning and fell across the legs of the loungers. He felt

the Mexican's black eyes on him, vaguely curious. A rawboned man in Levis and a torn gray vest came out of a door which advertised JUSTICE OF THE PEACE; he stopped and put his narrow-eyed attention on Cory. A pair of sagging gun belts seemed about to slide down over his narrow hips.

Cory felt the stares levelled on him. But these men were strangers. Matt was not yet here, nor was Oley. And then he had a moment's panic, wondering if they had changed more than he would remember.

He pushed the door open and walked up to the counter where a sallow-faced young man with a cast in his left eye was swatting flies with a rolled-up newspaper. Cory set his bag down at his feet and read the register. Disappointment was a sharp prod in him.

Neither Matt's nor Oley's name was written on the smudged page. He saw that he was the first man to register here in a week. Unconsciously he glanced at the battered clock over the counter. Three o'clock. This was the day, he thought. This *was* May 17th. But he asked the clerk, just to make sure.

"Yeah," the man answered. "Thursday, the 17th. Just another goddam day in this fleabitten town. Why?"

Cory shrugged. "I had an appointment with someone—guess he hadn't shown up."

"Are you staying long?"

"Don't know," Cory muttered. "Maybe not more than tonight." He put two dollars down on the counter and started to pick up the key the clerk tossed to him. He brought his hand across his jaw, feeling the bristle under his palm.

"Is there a barber in town?"

"Sure, four doors down the street, just past the Justice of the Peace's place," the clerk said. "Look out if Tony's quiet, though."

Cory frowned. "Why?"

"It means he's drunk," the clerk grunted. "He sliced a piece off Joe Kenton's ear a few days ago. Tony generally has a fight with his wife about this time of the week and takes it out beltin' the mescal bottle. Damn good barber when he's sober, though," the clerk added cheerfully.

"Thanks for the information," Cory said.

He started to pick up his bag and the clerk said: "Tony'll be closing in about twenty-five minutes. Always closes early on Thursday. I'll take your bag up to your room for you."

Cory nodded. "Thanks again."

He found Tony a short, mild-looking Mexican who chattered a little too much, but which reassured Cory.

"Not many *estranjeros* come to Quito," he said. "You first in ten days."

"You sure?" Cory asked. "No one else come to town today?"

"*Si.*" Tony had nodded emphatically, waving his razor. "No one come into Quito without me see him!"

That meant neither Matt nor Oley had arrived. Cory looked out into the wide street where the sun glared from tawny earth.

A one-horse town stuck in a corner of West Texas. Population not more than 100, counting the stray dogs that nosed the alleys. Two saloons, a general store, the hotel and a score of lesser, ramshackle structures.

A watering place for the riders of the big Crosshatch spread and the few scattered nesters along the Sweetwater.

They had to show up! Panic made its sharp run through Cory again. If they didn't— He thought of the money buried out in the badlands. He'd never find it without them. Ten bitter years gone to hell!

He left the barbershop and walked back along the walk. A slight breeze ruffled the yellow neckerchief at his sun-burned throat. He sucked in his lips, feeling alone and watched—he knew the population of Quito was wondering what had brought him here.

A vague uneasiness came to him; he paused and looked back down the street, following it until it became a trail which wandered off across the flats. He slid his

hand down over the cool handle of his Colt, but it offered little comfort.

"They'll be here!" he muttered. But he was no longer sure. They've got to show up, he thought savagely.

The desk clerk was not in sight as he went inside. There was no one in the dingy lobby, and as he went up the stairs to the second floor the lobby clock struck four.

"Maybe they forgot the day," he said, thinking out loud. "Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it was the 18th."

But he knew he was right, and he knew they had not forgotten. He walked past his door before realizing it. He turned back and put his hand on the glazed knob. Without knowing why he hesitated.

He heard no sound to alert him, only his heavy breathing rasping harshly in the stillness.

Getting jittery, he thought and cursed himself. Turning the knob, he stepped inside his room.

The man sitting on the bed was facing the door. He had a faded Army blanket wrapped around his Colt. Even so the .45 made a sound, a muffled report, and a wisp of smoke curled up from charred wool.

The acrid odor added its pungent touch to bite of gunsmoke.

Cory sagged in the middle. He died hard. His eyes bulged in his head and his mouth worked—he fought to get his tongue to obey his will. His fingers had closed automatically over the bone handle of his Colt, but he lacked the strength to lift it.

He was still alive, however, when the killer bent over him and ran eager fingers through all his pockets, looking for the map.

Cory died then, with a strangely bitter smile on his lips. Somewhere back in his thoughts, built up slowly through the doubts accumulating through the years, he had prepared for just such a thing as this.

The killer found the map, scanned it briefly. He was smiling as he closed the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER II

Trail Meeting

JIM HATFIELD heard the dog barking before he came in sight of the accident on the trail. The Lone Wolf had hit the wagon road in the late afternoon, after a long ride in from the nearest rail town, and he had been pushing Goldy hard.

"Rendezvous in Quito," he murmured to the big golden stallion. "We've got to make it before night, Goldy. They'll be expecting us."

The powerful, thoroughbred stallion had put the miles under his flashing hoofs. They had left the main road at the county seat of Caldwell and cut across wild country, heading for the small desert town of Quito on the edge of the Soapstone badlands.

It was lonely country west of the county seat—a seemingly empty expanse of sparse grass, scrub oak and thorn bush. A hard and bitter land broken by buttes and mesas, and though the big Ranger saw few signs of cattle along the way he rode, Jim knew that not too many miles south were located the big Crosshatch spread and a half dozen smaller outfits strung out along the Sweetwater. Several times during the afternoon, however, he spotted bands of wild mustangs dusting the low hills.

A brutal sun slammed heat down out of a cotton-flecked sky. Sweat plastered Jim's faded blue shirt to the small of his back, made half moons under his arms. He was riding against time and he had a rendezvous to keep for a dead man. The Lone Wolf glanced at the lowering sun with hard impatience.

Running across the little-used road which was little more than a pair of wagon ruts, he had guessed at which way to turn. The excited barking of the dog had turned him in that direction. Now, as he came around a sandstone outcrop flanking the road he saw the overturned buggy.

Jim pulled up. A wire-haired terrier was running back and forth in front of the

overturned vehicle. The still-spinning wheel indicated to the Ranger that the accident must have occurred only a few moments before. A line-backed dun gelding, harness trailing, was cropping spiky grass a dozen feet away.

The Lone Wolf's gaze searched for the buggy's driver. He saw a levi-clad, boyish figure standing shakily just beyond the vehicle. The driver must have spotted Jim at the same time; he made a stumbling run for the buggy.

Hatfield kneed Goldy toward the overturned rig.

The slim figure ducked down under the buggy and came into sight again holding a short-barreled carbine. Close up Jim saw that it was a girl—or a woman. The boyishness disappeared as he noticed the rounded hips and the swelling figure behind the cotton shirt. A straw hat, wide-brimmed to shade her face, was tilted back and Jim noticed that her hair was yellow-brown and had a high sheen.

He noticed, too, the hostility in her eyes.

Jim eased back in saddle. "Need any help?" he asked cheerfully.

The girl shook her head, her mouth tightening. She had a scratch on her cheek and sand still clung to the left side of her face and her left arm. She looked over twenty, and in this country old enough to be married and have two or three kids. Yet there was a quick clean glance to her that made Jim think she was not wearing any man's brand.

"Not from your kind!" she snapped.

The Lone Wolf knuckled his two-day stubble, knowing he presented a rather dubious appearance to this girl. He was wearing nondescript range clothes and the Peacemakers on his hips were in holsters thonged down.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt," he said, disregarding the carbine in her hands. He put his glance on the road and saw where the buggy had come down the trail and run over a rock imbedded in the roadway.

"You must have been moving pretty fast not to have seen it," he commented. "You were probably in a bit of a hurry."

"Whether I am or not is none of your business!" the girl retorted. Her eyes were gray, with flecks of gold dancing in them. He reappraised her, noticing the litheness and grace with which she held herself. The clothes she was wearing, though, looked as if they belonged to her brother—if she had a brother. They were a bit loose at the waist, but tight across the seat. And the shirt was tight in the place where it would not be tight on her brother.

She looked outdoorsy, as though she had been born and brought up in this kind of country. But her speech and bearing gave this the lie.

He shrugged. "I'm sorry. It isn't my business, at that." He touched his hat. "I'm a stranger to these parts, ma'am. Or is it miss?"

"That, too, is none of your business," she answered coldly. She kept the carbine's muzzle on him, but there was a trace of impatience in her and she bit her lips.

He smiled. "I'm headed for Quito. I'd be much obliged if you'd set me straight."

"It's that way," she said quickly, giving a quick tilt with her head downtrail. "About five miles."

The terrier had quit barking. He stood by her side, eyeing Jim, his head cocked to one side, his tongue out.

Jim swung off the sorrel. "The least I can do, ma'am," he murmured, ignoring the girl's sharp exclamation and threatening shift of muzzle. He reached down and his shoulder muscles bunched as he righted the buggy. He crouched to examine the wheel which had run over the rock.

"Cracked axle," he pointed out. "It might hold out until you get to town. But I'd take it easy on in." He moved away from her, a tall, wide-shouldered man with the easy step of a prowling cat. The line-backed dun turned and eyed him with suspicion as he approached.

"Easy, boy," Jim soothed. "We'll get you hitched up in no time."

The girl watched while Jim backed the gelding between the shafts and hitched

Hatfield sat Goldy's saddle, and knew every eye in Quito was watching him

up, looping the reins around the whip handle.

Jim turned to her. "Might as well do the job right," he said drily. "Now if you'll allow me, ma'am—"

The girl took a step backward. "Keep away!" she said tensely. "I can manage without you."

She didn't see him move. But the carbine was suddenly in his hands. He put the rifle up on the seat and turned to her. She stood stiffly, her face white. He picked her up and set her in the buggy.

The terrier growled and made a lunge for Jim's leg. The Long Wolf scooped him up with careless gesture and deposited him beside the girl. He stepped away from the buggy and waved his hand.

"Ride easy, ma'am," he said and grinned.

HE PASSED her on the road and came into Quito with the sun almost gone behind the shouldering bulk of Tortilla Butte. Jim saw the town as a dirty splotch in the middle of the road. The trail ran through it and beyond it, losing itself against the dun-colored uplands to the north.

A wide place in a little-traveled road, nothing more. But the key to a hundred thousand dollars was here, and the Lone Wolf's thoughts went back to the man for whom he was keeping this rendezvous.

Oley Jones and Cory Bates should be in Quito now, if Matt Singleton's story was true. And the big Ranger knew it to be true, for he had known Matt for five years and had come to trust him.

McDowell's ace lieutenant let his gaze take in the town. He sat Goldy's saddle, a big man hard as this Texas land, and he knew that every eye in Quito was watching him. It was that kind of a town.

The adobe-walled, two-storied Mesa House with its double-deck gallery and the saloon facing it across the street were the only two buildings of any conse-

quence; the rest were a straggle of tin-roofed shacks.

A couple of broncs stood hipshot in front of the saloon rack; a Chinaman, dressed in black silk, his queue touching his shoulders, came out to the walk and emptied a bucket of slops in the street.

These were the only signs of life in Quito.

Jim reached in his pocket for the makings. And while he built himself his cigarette, he let his thoughts slip back to what brought him to this godforsaken town.

It was less than a week ago that Matt Singleton, Texas Ranger, had died. Matt and Jim had been on a job together, rounding up the Corbin bunch, and Matt had taken a buckshot charge from old Sol Corbin. He died before Jim could get him to a doctor. But he had told the Lone Wolf a strange story before he passed away.

A story involving a hundred thousand dollar train robbery, and the subsequent burial of the money in the badlands northwest of Quito.

"It's been ten years, Jim," Matt had said. "Next week. We promised to meet in Quito. My section of the map is —is in my wallet. It ain't any good without Oley's and Cory's." He closed his eyes, his face twisting with the pain. "One hundred thousand dollars, Jim. There were five of us in on it. But Rocky got it in the getaway, and the Kid was kicked to death. That left only me and Oley Jones and Cory Bates. Cory's about my age, my size. Oley was the boss. Small, thin man about five foot seven. Wouldn't go over one-thirty with his pockets full of lead.

"Me an' Cory was kids, Jim. Threw in with Oley and the others for the hell of it. Crazy thing to do. I never felt good about it, don't feel right now. I never really wanted the money."

Jim believed Matt. The man had earned a reputation as a good Ranger; and he had buried his past well.

The Wells Fargo train robbery had occurred in New Mexico, he remembered, but the holdup men had fled into Texas and their trail had disappeared there. Speculation had put the surviving holdup men in Mexico, and several railroad detectives had spent fruitless months south of the border in vain effort to get a lead on the stolen money.

Vaguely Jim remembered that the Wells Fargo messenger in the baggage car had been implicated in the holdup and sentenced to a prison term in Yuma. The man had pleaded his innocence even after his conviction and the prosecution had gained no information from him concerning the whereabouts of his supposed partners.

The holdup remained one of those crimes which stayed on the books, and a ten thousand dollar reward was still posted by Wells Fargo for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the remaining holdup men and the recovery of the money.

Jim's eyes held a cold glitter. The trail had faded at Quito because the train robbers had buried the money and gone their separate ways, losing themselves in the anonymity of living. Matt had turned Ranger after first trying his hand at prospecting and driving for a freight outfit. Cory Bates and Oley Jones had probably taken similar paths, each man waiting only for passage of ten years. Waiting for the rendezvous at Quito, and the money they would split between them.

Ten years for less than thirty-five thousand dollars! Some men would feel it was worth it.

Goldy moved restlessly and tossed his head and Jim grinned. "All right you oat-burner, we'll mosey on. You'll bed down in a nice clean stall tonight—I hope."

BALL'S Stables was on the edge of town. Two old wagons, weathered beyond use, decorated the manure-littered yard. Beyond the sagging-roofed barn a pole corral dipped down into a sandy wash. A couple of dispirited, sway-backed broncs stood at the far end of the enclosure, watching time and their youth fade in the shadows of the far hills.

Jim dismounted at the foot of the wooden ramp. The big sliding door was all but closed. He waited a moment to see if anyone would come out. A mangy tomcat with a chewed left ear came around the corner of the barn and flattened at sight of Jim. The Lone Wolf flipped the butt of his cigaret at the prowling feline and watched him disappear in the direction he had come.

He led Goldy up the ramp and put his shoulder to the door. Rusty hinges squealed harshly in the evening quiet.

Goldy snorted warningly and jerked at his reins and Jim whirled. He took a long slow breath, eyeing the gun in the youngster's fist.

The boy was less than five feet away, inside the barn. He looked as though he had been coming out when Jim slid the door back. But there was straw clinging to his clothes which were, except for his hat, exact duplicates of those worn by the girl Jim had encountered on the road. He looked like that girl, too, though his hair was lighter and cropped close and he wore his Stetson cocked back on his head.

"Not this time," the boy snarled. "I got a gun in my hand this time."

"Not this time or any other time!" Hatfield agreed. It was gloomy inside the barn, but not so dark he couldn't see that this youngster must have taken a beating recently. His face was swollen and his left eye was almost closed—

"Big Mack couldn't finish it," the boy said bitterly. "Bettes send you in his place?"

"Jeff! Jeff!" A man moved out of the deeper shadows behind the boy. "Hold your tongue, boy. He don't like one of Bettes's riders!"

"Looks like a gunslinger to me!" the boy snarled. "Like the rest of those horse thieves."

The man put a hand on Jeff's shoulder, pulled him back. "Put that gun away, Jeff. Get back out of sight. It'll be dark in an hour. You can ride then."

Jeff had a stubborn moment and waiting, Jim caught the odor of peppermint on the boy's breath— then Jeff shrugged. He slid his Remington into his low-slung holster, flung a darkly hostile glance at Jim, and moved away.

"I'm Ball Hotchkiss," the man said bluntly, turning to Jim. He held a rusted single barrel shotgun in the crook of his arm, but he made no threatening move with it. He was a short, paunchy man in his middle forties, bald, somewhat jowely. Time had seamed hard lines around his thin-lipped mouth; his eyes were blue and cold and watchful.

"The kid's had a bad time. Bunch of hoss thieves ran off with some of his father's stock. He came to town and ran afoul of Big Mack and shot off his mouth, naming Big Mack as one of the thieves." He made a quick gesture with his free hand. "I'm telling you this, fellow, so you'll understand why the kid was touchy just now."

"Don't blame him," Hatfield said drily. "I wouldn't be in a welcoming mood myself, if it had happened to me."

Hotchkiss nodded. His eyes were measuring Jim, making mental note of this big man with the easy walk and the Peacemakers thonged down, gunfighter style, on his hips. Big Mack would have a time, trying it, he thought meagerly, and wondered what had brought this man to town.

"Not many strangers come to Quito," he said slowly. "It's only a one-horse town way off the main trails."

"Suits me fine," Jim cut in coldly. He glanced toward the darkened stalls. The boy had vanished somewhere in the darkness.

The stableman shrugged. He reached out for Goldy's bridle and the big sorrel snorted softly and jerked his head back.

Jim said, "Treat him gentle, Ball. He doesn't take to a heavy hand."

Hotchkiss nodded slowly. "I'll take care of him. You aiming to stay in Quito a spell?"

"Depends," Jim answered shortly. "That kid with the bruised face. Looks like someone I know. What did you say his name was?"

"Jeff Steele." The stableman scowled.

"Lives with his sister and his folks on a horse spread south side of Tortilla Butte. The Drag Seven. It's about ten, eleven miles out of town, heading east."

Jim nodded. Steele? The name was familiar, but he couldn't nail it down.

Hotchkiss took Goldy's bridle. "I charge a dollar a day, hard money. I sleep light and I keep a load in old Besty here. I'm not worried you'll skip town without paying me, Mister, but—"

Jim grinned. "The name's Matt Singleton," he said. He brought out a silver cartwheel and tossed it to the man. "Sleep easy, Ball."

Hotchkiss's fingers closed tight around the silver dollar. He heard Jeff stir in the darkness at the far end of the barn. Ball licked his lips. The coin dug hard into his palm, but he was unaware of it.

CHAPTER III

"Forget It, Stranger!"

THE Lone Wolf paused by the sagging board fence fronting the street. The stables were at the south end of Quito's only thoroughfare, and there was a wide, can-littered lot between it and the nearest building.

The buggy was just wheeling past him. The girls sat stiff in the seat, with the terrier beside her, ears cocked alertly. Jim waved to her but she ignored him.

He watched her drive up the deserted street and pull in by the Mesa House. The sun was gone from the sky and the gray of twilight was over the land. Supper smells were in the air, and from within one of the huddled adobe shacks at this end of town a boy suddenly began a loud bawling.

Jim measured the town. A man with a good arm could heave a rock clear to the other side of Quito.

He shrugged. He didn't expect to be in this town long—just long enough to keep his rendezvous for Matt Singleton.

He thought of what might happen when he walked in on Oley Jones and Cory Bates. He expected trouble. But a Colt Peacemaker put up a powerful argument.

Hatfield hit the boardwalk in front of the first building and started toward the Mesa House. The girl had left the buggy, he saw, and disappeared inside some building. The terrier sat on the seat, eyeing the town.

Across the street loomed the Aces High Saloon. Two men came through the batwings and climbed into saddle of the horses at the rack. They wheeled away from the rack and came down the street, passing Jim. The blocky rider on the inside gave him a casual glance. But the man on the big bay turned and looked back at Jim with sudden interest.

Jim caught a glimpse of a narrow, pock-marked face and narrowed eyes, he felt the sharp jolt of recognition and his jaw hardened. *Utah*! The Montana killer!

Hatfield had never run into this man before, but the name Utah was on the Ranger's list of Fugitives. The man was wanted up in Montana for his brutal killings in Baker County War— one of the most recent and bloodiest battles between sheep and cattle raisers.

Utah. That was all the name given for this hard, deadly man with the low-slung guns and ugly face. Jim wondered briefly what the man was doing in Quito. It was not the kind of town Utah would frequent, unless he was hiding out.

He was thinking about the gunman as he came abreast of the Mesa House. The dog on the buggy seat barked in recognition and he turned and grinned at the terrier. "Glad you remembered me," he murmured.

He started to turn toward the hotel when he heard the saloon batwings creak again. The Lone Wolf's neck prickled. He put down his warbag and reached for his Bull Durham again and as he spun himself a cigaret he lifted his casual glance to the man who had come out of the saloon and stood watching him.

He was a long-shanked, rangy hombre with a face shaded by the down-tilted brim of a Stetson. Something metallic glittered from the left flap of his unbuttoned vest.

Hatfield felt the man's long, studied re-

gard on him; he shrugged slightly as he cupped a match to his cigaret. Then he heard the girl's voice, sharp in the evening quiet and he turned to see her come out of the doorway next door to the hotel.

A man's voice laughed unpolitely and she whirled to face the doorway, her temper flaring. "Jeff came to see you this morning! You can't deny that, Mister Bettes!"

A short, grizzled man appeared in the doorway. Jim's glance took in the legend over his tead: DAVE BETTES, JUSTICE OF THE PEACE. He was a thin, unkempt man in a soiled Prince Albert coat and black, flat-crowned hat. A badger beard was stained brown around the mouth and chin with old tobacco juice.

Bettes shifted the tobacco wad around in his cheek and spat carelessly across the boards. His eyes were small gray chips of glass measuring her with insolent shrewdness.

"You're got a hard head, Miss Steele. I told you I didn't see your brother today. Sure, he came to my office. But I was out. I heard he walked across the street to the saloon and got drunk and picked a fight with Big Mack." The man's yellow-stained teeth showed in wolfish grin. "Got beat up for his pains—"

"Jeff doesn't drink!" the girl cut in angrily. "And you know why he came to town. We lost fifteen horses two days ago. One of them was my red roan mare. Jeff trailed them to that so-called ranch you've got up by Dry Creek."

"Your brother's a liar!" Bettes snapped coldly. "None of my men stole your horses."

"Jeff said they did, and I believe him!" the girl flared. "You run things pretty much your way out here, don't you? Half the men you've got riding for you wouldn't dare show their face at the county seat. But up here you're the boss." She made a picture facing the slovenly justice, that drew Jim's admiration—anger put color in her cheeks and a brightness to her hazel eyes.

"If Jeff's hurt I'll see that the law is notified. And I don't mean that gun-happy killer you pinned a badge on, either!"

The long-shanked man came across the street, sliding his boots through the thick dust. The heat of the day lingered, and Jim, eyeing the man out of the corners of his eyes, sensed trouble heading his way. The deputy reached the boardwalk beside the buggy and stepped up, a quickness to his motions.

He took hold of the girl's arm before she realized he was beside her. "You make a loud noise, Miss Steele!" he said harshly. "I could hear you all the way across the street!"

The girl jerked her arm from his grasp and whirled on him. The terrier growled from the buggy seat in low warning.

"You'll hear me a lot clearer, Vic," she snapped, "if you put a hand on me again!"

The man with the badge on his vest grinned crookedly. He was facing Jim, looking over the girl's shoulder, and his yellow-gray eyes were narrowed, judging Hatfield.

"I might do just that," he said insolently. He put his hands on her shoulders and his fingers tightened. The girl cried out in a short, muffled gasp of pain.

The Lone Wolf flipped his cigarette into the road. The rangy man was inviting his interference; there was that sneering challenge in the man's eyes. Hatfield took a step toward them and the deputy's eyes glittered.

"Forget it, stranger! This ain't none of your business," he said thinly.

The Lone Wolf put his hard glance on the sloppy man grinning with faint amusement in he doorway. The girl was trying to break loose from the deputy. Her eyes met his and a mute appeal flashed in her eyes.

Hatfield said, "A man's business is where he looks for it, deputy. I'm making this mine."

"I can take care of myself!" the girl cried, and kicked the rangy man in the shins.

The deputy's teeth showed in a pained snarl. He lifted his left hand and cuffed the girl on the side of the head, sending

her staggering off the walk.

He was facing Hatfield then, his right hand coming up fast with a Colt when the Lone Wolf's shoulder rammed him against the building. The big Ranger's body pinned the deputy's gun hand against his side—the man tried to jerk away and bring his Colt into the clear.

Jim caught his gun arm and spun him away from the wall. His own Peacemaker made its abrupt appearance then, jamming hard into the deputy's stomach. The man folded like a jackknife, his eyes rolling. Jim cuffed him around with a hard, contemptuous slap.

The deputy hit the low hitchrail with the back of his thighs and flipped backward over it. He landed on the back of his head and shoulders, groaned once, and went limp.

Dave Bettes straightened, eyed the muzzle of Jim's Colt, and let his hand fall away from the shoulder holster under his coat. He lifted his palm to his grizzled chin and rubbed his stained beard with speculative patience.

"You shouldn't have done that, fellow. Vic ain't going to like it," he said softly.

"Never thought much of a man who would hit a woman," Hatfield replied bleakly. "He's welcome to make what he wants of this!"

He let his glance slide off the man and noticed with faint surprise that the girl was gone. In the excitement he had not heard the buggy wheel away. Now he put his glance down the shadow-filled street, seeing her turn into Ball's stable yard.

He grinned wryly. She had not bothered to wait long enough to see what happened here, and he felt a cynical amusement at this. Evidently she and her brother were quite a pair.

Bettes had followed his glance. "You work for the Steeles?"

Jim shook his head and holstered his Colt. "I'm on vacation," he said, and there was a thin laughter in his voice.

Bettes frowned. "Then keep out of Vic's way, if you want to enjoy it. Better yet, get out of Quito!"

ment, interested in Utah.

vice, Mr. Bettes," he agreed. "I didn't come to Quito to stay."

"Few do," Bettes nodded. "If I was you, I'd be gone by morning."

"That's just the trouble," Jim said easily, prodding his forefinger against Dave Bettes's chest. "Too many people wishing they were someone else. It isn't healthy." He turned on his heel, leaving the dirty figure staring after him. He picked up his warbag and he was smiling as he entered the lobby of the Mesa House.

THE desk clerk was trimming the wick on his lamp when Hatfield loomed over the counter. He set the glass chimney carefully in place and turned to appraise the big man with the Stetson thumbed back from his forehead.

"You want a room by the week, or just for the night," the clerk asked, turning the register around toward the Ranger.

"I don't know yet," Hatfield replied. He ran his forefinger down the inked name on the page. "I'm expecting to meet a friend of mine here today," he explained casually. "Two of them, in fact. They were supposed to meet me here."

The clerk pursed his lips. He was a thin, serious-faced young man who had been born with a club foot and abandoned as a baby—he had been with Tom Vesey, owner of the Mesa House, since Tom and his wife had found him.

He looked Jim over again, remembering Cory Bates's questions. He nodded crisply. "Only other stranger in town, besides yourself, checked in about two this afternoon. His name's—" he glanced at the register, reading the name under Jim's forefinger—"that's the man. Cory Bates."

"That's him!" Jim agreed. "He and Oley Jones were to meet me here. Sort of reunion you might call it."

The clerk smiled primly. "Mr. Bates is in room 211. He was expecting you. He mentioned a Mr. Jones and a Mr. Singleton."

"I'm Matt Singleton," Jim answered levelly.

The clerk licked his lips. "You'll find Mr. Bates in his room. He went up little more than an hour ago. No Mr. Jones has checked in yet."

Jim frowned. "Send him up, soon as he checks in. We'll be waiting for him." He picked up his bag and crossed the dingy lobby to the stairs.

As Hatfield disappeared around the upstairs landing, Dave Bettes came into the lobby. He leaned against the counter and eyed the stairs, a small frown puckering his grizzled brows.

"Tough hombre, that one, Kenny," he muttered. "Second stranger to come to town in one day." He shook his head. "It ain't usual, for Quito. What did he want?"

"He asked about a Cory Bates and Oley Jones. Said they were friends of his who had planned a reunion here."

Bettes whistled softly. "Reunion, eh? That big hombre looks like some owl-hooter on the dodge, if you ask me. Did you catch his name?"

Kenny nodded eagerly. "He said he was Matt Singleton."

Bettes sucked his lips in over his teeth. "Never heard of him. But this is my town, Kenny. And I don't like strange gunmen coming into it. Don't like it at all!"

Bates's room was at the far end of the dim hallway. Boards creaked under Jim's boots as he rounded the newel post on the second floor and put his glance down that gloomy passageway.

A window faced the hall at the back of the hotel. Under it was a rickety landing and a flight of stairs leading to the back yard. It was a fire exit to be used by the upstairs tenants. The window was open now and a faint breeze churned the day's close heat.

Jim paused. He heard a murmuring of voices from the lobby and he recognized Bettes's tone, and smiled faintly. The man was suspicious—and remembering the Steele girl's accusations, Dave Bettes probably had a right to be. Jim shrugged. He was not in Quito to check on Dave Bettes—nor was he, at the momoment, interested in Utah.

He had come here at Matt's request, and because one hundred thousand dollars belonging to Wells Fargo had been buried in Texas soil. Cory Bates was already here, and Oley Jones would probabbe showing up soon. A hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money.

Jim knew that Cory would immediately know he was not Matt Singleton. What Bates would do when Jim confronted him would depend on what kind of man he was, and how much the money meant to him.

Hatfield considered this possibility, and frowned. He had a third of the map locating the cached loot. But he would need Bates's and Jones's directions, too. He had come to this rendezvous in Quito with no plan other than to take both Jones and Bates into custody and try to convince them that they would verly likely get off with a lighter sentence if they aided in the return of the Wells Fargo money.

Going down the hallway he heard the drunken snoring of some occupant in the room near the head of the stairs. A little further on a woman's nasal tones came through the thin door panels. "I did hear a shot, Sam, don't you dare tell me I didn't. It was about an hour ago, while you were out, probably swilling that cheap whisky they serve across the street."

A floor board popped under Jim's feet and the woman's voice cut off. A silence crouched behind that door. Jim walked on to Bates's room close by the rear window and knocked. He waited, listening for Bates behind the door—the breeze coming through the window at his elbow brought the odor of chile and the sudden snarling cry of cat momentarily trapped by a prowling dog.

A door opened in the hallway and Jim turned his head, laying his quick glance on the whiskered, stumpy man who cautiously stuck his head out. This was obviously the husband of the woman whose voice he had heard. The man stared at him with bright suspicion, then slowly pulled back and closed the door.

Behind Bates's door was an empty stillness.

Jim knocked again. The clerk had been definite that Bates was inside this room. But there was a strange lack of movement and wariness tensed the Lone Wolf. He put his hand on the knob, turned it, and shoved the door open.

Inside the room was a smothering blackness. He saw nothing move, nor was he greeted. Jim dropped his warbag and took two steps inside, and then he heard the faint, mocking laughter from his left and he spun around, drawing his Colt.

He caught the faint smell of peppermint in the room, and as he whirled he stumbled over a body on the floor. It threw him off balance and into the unseen clubbed Colt weilded by a shadowy arm.

He didn't feel the impact as he hit the floor.

CHAPTER IV

Strange Visitor

HATFIELD felt the light against his eyes first and he rolled over and lay face up, watching the scabrous ceiling wheel slowly in lopsided rhythm. His thoughts pulled together, like pieces of a puzzle, and as he began to remember what had happened he heard Vic's harsh voice snarl, "I told you he had a tough skull, Dave. He's coming to."

The Lone Wolf lay quiet, trying to still the revolving ceiling. There was a sharp pain over his left ear, and a dull throbbing in his head. Finally he turned and looked at the speaker.

Quito's special deputy sat on the edge of the bed, his hat cocked back on his balding head. He had a Colt in his hand, held idly—a sneer spread across his wedge-shaped features as he saw Jim's attention on him.

Between the Lone Wolf and the deputy lay a dead man. He was curled in a ball, knees pulled up against his chest, a big, gaunt man with a freshly-shaved face.

Hatfield had the sinking feeling that the dead man was Cory Bates.

He started to get up on his hands and knees, and the deputy got off the bed and put a heavy boot down on Jim's shoulders and shoved. Jim sprawled face down and rolled over, his anger overriding the throbbing pain in his head. He lunged up to his feet and his right hand made its instinctive reach for his Colt. He brushed the top of his empty holster and stopped short, eyeing the deputy's gun muzzle which was levelled ominously at his belt buckle.

Dave Bettes's voice was mild. "Vic's just begging for an excuse, feller."

The Lone Wolf took a deep breath. "I'll bet," he said tightly. His eyes were narrowed and a dangerous glint flickered in their green depths.

Vic chuckled. "Real tough hombre," he said, baiting Hatfield. "Assaults the law as soon as he comes to town. Ten minutes later he's in a room with a dead man—"

"Just a minute!" Jim snapped. "I didn't kill him. If you'll check my guns you'll see they haven't been fired!"

Dave nodded. "They've been checked. We know you didn't kill him. Fact is, we don't care who did. We never saw the jasper in Quito before. It's just that we like to keep this town clean. We don't like gunmen riding in to settle private grudges."

"It wasn't that kind of a meeting," Jim muttered. He could see the logic of the man's reasoning, but he was faintly suspicious of the man's motives.

"We checked the register and talked with Kenny, the desk clerk," Bettes said. "You told him you were Matt Singleton, and you wanted to see Cory Bates. Why?"

"I had an appointment with him here. Today." Jim's voice was level. "Me, Bates and Oley Jones. We agreed to meet here in Quito."

"What for?" Vic's voice interrupted harshly.

"That's our business!" Jim answered coldly.

Bettes shook his head. "Where's this other feller? Jones?"

Jim shrugged. "He didn't show up."

The deputy toed the dead man. "Someone killed Bates. Reckon it was this Jones jasper, Dave?"

"Maybe," Dave agreed, "but I doubt it." He turned to Hatfield. "There ain't a flea that can crawl into Quito without everybody in town knowing it. And you and this fellow Bates are the only strangers to come to town in ten days."

Hatfield glanced around the room. A shabby, meagerly furnished room. A sorry place to die in. But someone had known Bates would show up, and waited here to kill him. Only Jones would have known. And yet, according to these two men, no one answering Jones's description had come to Quito in days.

Bettes was fingering his dirty beard. "Three men held up the stage and took the express box about four days ago. The sheriff was out looking for them, he and a posse came through Quito two days ago. He reckoned they might have tried to cross the Soapstones into New Mexico."

Jim frowned. "What's that got to do with me?"

"Three men," Dave Bettes emphasized thinly. "The driver said he heard one of them call another Matt Singleton!"

The Lone Wolf stiffened. "That driver was lying. Or those holdup men were trying to frame me!"

"Frame you?" Bettes mocked. "How?"

Jim's mouth set harshly. He had come here as Matt Singleton, and he knew he'd have to play his role out. It was to have been a simple job. But now Cory Bates was dead and Oley Jones had not showed up. And a hundred thousand dollars buried somewhere in the badlands northwest of town could draw a lot of flies.

"The sheriff is due back through here tomorrow," Bates said softly. "I reckon I could forget your name, if you'll tell me what you came to Quito for."

"It was just a reunion," Jim muttered. "Between friends."

Bettes scowled. His eyes were flat and hard-looking as gray slate. "All right, feller. You tell that story to the sheriff in the morning. Try convincing him you and your friends were just planning a little convention in Quito."

Vic made a motion with his Colt. "In the meantime we've got just the room for you, Matt. Not as luxurious as this, maybe—but it's free. Pickup your warbag you left in the hall and let's get going. I'm anxious to check you in."

Jim did as he was told. He walked ahead of Vic and Dave Bettes, going down the hallway. A hatchet-faced woman and her stumpy husband peered at him as he went by their door. He heard her say, "I told you I heard a shot."

He walked down the stairs and across the dingy lobby and he was thinking of the faint peppermint smell that had been in Bates's room. And he knew that Jeff Steele had been the man behind the clubbed Colt. It looked as though Jeff Steele had killed Cory Bates. And Hatfield wanted to know why. He wanted to know where Jeff Steele figured in this rendezvous that had misfired.

THE Quito jail was a bare back room in Dave Bettes's office. It held a cot and a straw pad an an old Army blanket and a couple of packing cases. A tin can still held the butts of former inmates—the floor was dirty and cobwebs showed up in the corners where the lamplight reached.

Jim's pockets had been emptied in the office. Vic stood by while he performed the task, the deputy's eyes watched Jim as he placed matches, change, money and a pocket knife on the desk. Dave Bettes took Vic's Colt then, and stood by while the deputy went over Jim carefully, from behind—he found Jim's tobacco and tossed it on the desk beside Jim's other personal items.

"Reckon that's all," he muttered. "He had about forty-two dollars on him. Just about enough for a good two-day drunk."

Bettes swept the item into the top drawer of his desk. "You'll get this back in the morning, when the sheriff takes you off my hands," he muttered. He made a motion to the back room. "It's all yours, Matt!"

Jim walked into the bare room and the door was shut behind him. He heard a key turned in the lock. He walked to the cot now hidden in the darkness, felt it against his shins, and sat down. There was a stale, unwashed odor in the room.

Jim put his aching head between his hands. He was not worried about the sheriff in the morning. But what had happened here bothered him.

Someone had the map Matt Singleton had given him. He didn't know if Bettes or his special deputy had taken it while he was lying unconscious in Bates's room, or whether Jeff Steele had gone through his pockets first. Only his Ranger badge had not been found, and that was because Jim kept it well-hidden in a secret pocket sewn into the inside of his belt.

But he no longer had Matt's map, and it meant that Jeff, oddly enough, must have known of this rendezvous. Jeff was not Oley Jones, but the only other person who should have known about Matt's map was Oley Jones. Unless the kid had found the map in his pocket and taken it out of curiousity.

But what had brought the youngster to Cory's room in the first place? Jeff had not killed Bates. Or if he had, he had not killed him in the few moments before Jim had knocked on Cory's door. For Cory Bates looked as though he had been dead for at least an hour.

Jim lifted his head. There was a lot here that didn't make sense and it brought a bleak look to his eyes. A stage holdup with the name Matt Singleton planted. Jim knew that the real Matt Singleton was dead. But if Matt had been alive and on his way to a rendezvous with Oley Jones and Cory Bates, then the stage holdup would have been a frameup hard to beat.

The Lone Wolf got up and walked to the window. There was no glass in it, only a strap-iron latticework that looked as though it was the work of the local blacksmith. It was screwed to the wood frame. Jim put his hands on the cold iron and tested it. The lattice work was firm. He turned and walked back to the cot and settled down.

He heard Dave and his deputy talking in the other room, but their voices were low and non-distinguishable in content. After a while he heard the outer door close and a key was turned in the lock—then it was quiet in the flat-roofed, narrow building and Jim knew that both men had gone out.

Jim frowned. He had no doubt but that Dave Bettes was running his own little game here, using his phony title as Justice of the Peace as a cover. Once he got wind of what Hatfield was really here for, he'd try to cut himself in on the money.

A hard impatience shook Jim. At the worst the sheriff would take him back to Caldwell, where he could readily clear himself. But the delay bothered him. He had to get out of this back room cell tonight, he had to get to Jeff Steele. The tough kid obviously knew something about the rendezvous in Quito, knew more than anyone else here.

Unless it was Oley Jones. Of the three men who were to meet in Quito, only Jones had not shown up. Why?

The several probabilities presented themselves to the big Ranger. Oley Jones might be dead. Or he had been delayed. That was likely. If that was so, then Jones would be showing up within a day or two.

But if Jones had died, the loot buried in the Soapstones badlands might never be recovered. Looking at it coldly, Hatfield wondered why the holdup boss had ever designed such a plan. Hard-pressed and knowing that any attempt to spend that kind of money would immediately give them away, Jones had figured out the scheme of burying the money and coming back for it later.

But the weak link was, it depended on the three of them coming back to Quito.

And Jones had not come back.

A hand brushed against the barred window. Jim heard it, soft as it was, and turned quickly in the dark, his green eyes searching the window square. He saw a shadow move across the lattice-

work and then something metallic clanged softly. Hatfield came up off the cot, soundless as a prowling cat.

The metal object slid down the inner wall. Jim crossed to the window and flattened against the wall, his eyes narrowing with surprise.

A .45 was being lowered into the room at the end of a piece of twine. It came down slowly until it bumped against the floor. Then a face appeared against the latticework.

JIM'S right hand snaked through one of the openings. His steel fingers closed around a soft throat. A startled gasp was cut off short. And he found himself looking into the face of the girl he had met on the trail outside of Quito!

His fingers loosened and he said bleakly: "What kind of a game are you playing, Miss Steele?"

She gulped and massaged her throat for a moment. Finally her voice came in a squeaky whisper. "I—I thought you were asleep."

"And you thought of a new way to waken me," he said drily. "Just what are you up to?"

"I want you out," she said. There was a note of defiance in her voice. "You helped me this afternoon. I want to return the favor."

"Why?"

"I told you." Her voice sounded desperate now. "It's my brother, Jeff. He's disappeared. I've looked all over town. I know he's in trouble. And I don't know of anyone else I can turn to for help."

"And how do you figure I can get out of here, Miss Steele?" Jim asked.

"This gun," she said quickly. "I borrowed it from Ball Hotchkiss." She turned her head in sudden alarm and her voice was impatient. "I've got to go now. They're coming back. I'll meet you at Ball's Stables."

"Wait!" Jim's voice held steel in it. "Are you sure that Hotchkiss—"

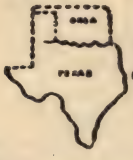
"He's my father's friend," the girl cut in. "He knows why we've come back." She drew hurriedly away from the window and he saw her dart into the thicker shadows between the two buildings. A moment later Jim heard the outer door open and close softly.

Hatfield unknotted the twine from the trigger guard of the Colt and examined the gun in the faint starshine seeping in through the barred window. He found it loaded, and it appeared to be in working order.

Yet he didn't feel right about it. He walked back to the cot, slid the twine under the pad, and stood frowning. Jeff Steel obviously had been with Ball Hotch-

A TALL TEXAS TALE

NOWHERE TO GO



A YOUNG rancher, visiting the city, stopped in at a haberdashery. While looking around, he noticed the clerk folding a pair of men's gaily colored pajamas.

"What's them?" asked the rancher.

"Why," said the clerk, "they're pajamas."

Not satisfied, the rancher drawled, "What they for?"

"You wear them at night," said the clerk. "Would you like to buy a pair?"

"Nope, don't reckon," replied the rancher. "I never go nowheres at night—except to bed."

—James D. Wilson

kiss all afternoon. Judging from his appearance, with straw still clinging to his clothes, the kid had probably slept off the results of his beating in the loft. If so, why hadn't the stableman told the girl? Or had she been lying about her brother's disappearance?

The man who had come back to the office headed for the back room. Jim slid the Colt under the pad and sat down, a dangerous glint in his eyes. This, too, seemed too pat, somehow.

The door swung open. It swung inward and banged gently against the inner wall, but there was no one framed in the doorway. A glint of admiration came into the Lone Wolf's eyes. Dave Bettes was a wary old fox, his sloppy appearance belied his canniness.

Lamplight spilled its bar of illumination across the threshold, reaching as far as the edge of the cot. Dave Bettes moved into sight then, a good five feet inside the office—he was holding a cocked pistol in his hand.

"Glad to see you weren't ready to try any tricks," he said and chuckled. "I want to talk to you, while Vic's away."

Jim said, "I've got ears," and waited.

Dave Bettes shuffled into the back room. He could see Jim on the cot, and his eyes made their swift search of the room. He saw nothing amiss.

"I've been thinking things over," he said, leaning back against the door framing. "Strikes me funny that a man of your kind would fall into a trap like this. Coming into town so soon after the holdup—"

"You still sure that I'm one of the men who held up that stage?"

Dave shrugged. "Now I'm a man who believes what he hears. Though not all he hears." His grin had a sort of obscene twist to it. He worked his chaw around in his mouth, looked around the room and spat across the floor. "Never take a man at face value, I say, nor judge things the way they look."

"Careful cuss, aren't you?" Jim said curtly.

"Have to be. This is a tough town, feller. Stuck like a wart on the edge of the Soapstone badlands. There ain't much between here and Taos. There used to be a stage run through town on its way to Santa Fe, but it lost too much money. Hell, there ain't any excuse for this town being here now. Sort of a watering place for the boys on the spreads south and east. But we get another breed of cat every now and then—the kind who's looking back over his shoulder and keeps a quick hand on his Colt." He paused and Jim sensed Bettes was waiting for some remark from him. In his way the man was feeling him out, trying to place him.

"So it's a tough town," the Lone Wolf said. "What are you getting at?"

"You came here to rendezvous with a couple of pals," Bettes said. "Why here? What is there in Quito to interest you?"

Jim put his hand on the edge of the cot and slowly edged his fingers under the pad. "Might be because I'm of that strange breed of cat," he said coldly. "Maybe I don't like what's on my back trail."

"Quit stalling!" Bettes snarled. His voice was ugly now, there was little patience in it. "Let me in on why you came to Quito and I'll see that you ain't here when the sheriff rides by in the morning."

"I don't intend to be," Jim said. He straightened up and the gun in his hand caught Bettes flat-footed. Let's just swap places for a while, Dave," Jim suggested.

Bettes straightened against the framing. His gun hand quivered. But something he saw in the big man's eyes, a dangerous, unsmiling glitter held him, forestalled any rash move.

"You won't get out of town," he muttered. "Vic's just across the street."

"I'll take my chances," Jim said grimly. He walked to the old reprobate and took the gun from his hand and jammed it under his belt. It was a .38 Smith and Wesson with a cut down barrel and Jim reckoned it came from the shoulder holster under Bette's coat. But he made Dave turn around and made sure the man had no other weapon on him before spinning

him around and shoving him toward the cot.

"All right," he growled. "Who's got it? You or Vic?"

"Got what?"

"A piece of wrapping paper roughly six inches square. A drawing of a map."

Dave's yellow teeth showed in sudden grin. "So that's it! That's what you came to Quito for. A map?"

"No," Jim corrected him coldly. "I had the map. Somebody took it from me, in Bates's room. It was either you or Vic."

"Or the man who slugged you!" Bettes snarled. "Damn it, Matt, tell me what you're after and I'll throw in with you. For a cut—"

"You'll get a cut, across the mouth!" Jim snapped. He made a motion with the gun in his hand. "Sit down. You can bellow as soon as I leave. But if you try it now I'll have to quiet you with this!"

Bettes glowered as he sank down on the cot. "You damn fool!" he raged. "You won't get away with this."

Jim closed the door on him. He turned the key in the lock and left it there. He listened for a moment, smiling grimly—there was no outcry from Bettes.

Turning away, he began to rumage through the desk. He found his Colts and cartridge belts in a drawer and he buckled his double rig on, leaving Dave's .38 in their place. He thrust the weapon the girl had lowered into the cell under his belt and blew out the lamp.

He was outside before Dave's voice sounded. Jim put his hard glance on the lighted windows of the saloon across the street, waited a moment, then started at a brisk walk toward the southern section of Quito. Midway down the long block he turned into a narrow alley and lost himself in the shadows.

CHAPTER V

Disturbing Quietness

BALL HOTCHKISS moved restlessly on the ramp, his narrowed gaze searching the night. The noises which drifted to him from uptown had no unusual importance.

He felt a crawling uneasiness disturb him. He didn't like the girl's plan, but he had agreed with her that she had no other choice.

Hotchkiss started.

Behind him he heard the stamping of horses in their stalls. The big sorrel, particularly, seemed restless. Ball thought of the magnificent stallion and of the man who owned him and a chill put goose pimples down his spine. If things didn't go off right they'd have a tiger by the tail!

He kept waiting for some commotion up the street, some indication that the big man who called himself Matt Singleton had broken jail. After a moment he took his pipe from his pocket and clamped it between his teeth. At this moment he was glad to have something to chew on.

Where was the big stranger? Had he suspected a trap? Ball was suddenly afraid he would not come.

He heard a soft whisper from behind him and he turned, pausing just inside the dim glow of the turned-down lantern hanging from an overhead rafter.

The girl said despairingly, "Isn't he coming?"

Ball faced her. She was hidden in the deep shadows by the first stall, his shotgun in her hands. Ball had insisted she take the shotgun—it argued with a big fist at close quarters.

"Looks like he smelled a rat," Ball said. "Either he's staying put, or he left town. Anyway, it don't seem like it went the way you expected, Miriam." He started to turn around.

"Things went just the way you wanted it Miss Steele!" the voice broke in. It came from the darkness of the yard, just behind Ball. "Now, if you'll just put that shotgun down and step out to join Mr. Hotchkiss in the light, I'll feel more kindly, Miss Steele!"

The girl gasped. Ball's back was ramrod stiff.

His voice came quick, harsh. "Better do as he says, Miriam."

The girl propped the shotgun against the stall boards and walked into the light. Hotchkiss turned to face the heavy shadows behind him.

"She didn't mean you no harm!" he said gruffly. "She just wanted to talk to you."

"I get close-mouthed in front of a shotgun muzzle," Hatfield interjected bleakly. "And I think you're a liar, even if you are trying to be a gentleman about it."

Hotchkiss scowled. "She got you free," he pointed out.

"But she doesn't trust me," the Lone Wolf chuckled grimly. He came out of the shadows, moving quickly, his tall body looming over Hotchkiss. He was in the barn then and stepping back until his broad shoulders touched the inner wall. He was on the edge of the lamplight, a big, cold-eyed man with a gun in his hand. He made a slight motion with it. "Let's all get away from the doorway," he suggested. "That special deputy of Bettes's might be out looking for me, and somebody would get hurt."

Miriam Steele moved toward him and Ball put his shoulder to the door, closing all but a foot of the aperture. He turned to face Jim, the pipe jutting stiffly from his jaw.

"We know why you're here, Mr. Singleton," the girl said hurriedly. "I don't care about the money. But it's Jeff I'm worried about."

"Money?" Jim's green gaze held a questioning frown.

"A hundred thousand dollars!" Ball snapped. "Buried around here somewhere!"

"Well, well," Jim breathed. "I didn't know it was common knowledge."

"It ain't!" Ball growled. "And to tell you the truth, we're just guessing."

"Who's we?"

"My father, my brother and I," the girl cut in stiffly. "Dad's willing to forget the money. But Jeff isn't. He and mother think that Dad earned that money, and they want it."

"I thought the money belonged to Wells Fargo," Jim said drily. He was trying to make sense from what this girl was saying.

"If you're Matt Singleton," Ball growled, "you know what happened. Five men held up the Limited in New Mexico, ten years ago. Forced their way into the express car, tied up the messenger, and got away with a hundred thousand dollars. The Santa Fé messenger remembered them talking, he heard the names Cory Bates and Matt Singleton and Voss Grant. He never forgot those names. Because he spent six years out of a ten year sentence in a stinking cell in Yuma. Six years, although he was an innocent man. Just because the prosecutor made a jury believe he was in with the holdup men."

"That man was my father!" the girl said.

Jim frowned. It began to make a clearer pattern now. The names Matt Singleton and Cory Bates were known to Jeff, it was possible he had killed Bates and he was in here when Jim had told Ball Hotchkiss he was Matt Singleton. Jeff could have gone around to Bates's room and waited for him. It meant that Jeff Steele had Matt's map, and probably Cory Bates's as well.

But where was Oley Jones?

"My father came to this country because of that money," Miriam said. Her voice was pleading now. "But he no longer wants it. He's seen what it's done to Jeff, and—" she shook her head, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "All we want is to be let alone. You and your friends can have the money. Just don't hurt Jeff."

"I don't intend to," Jim said sharply. "But if your brother killed Cory Bates I may have to arrest him."

"*Arrest him*?" Ball's pipe jerked in his mouth. "Who are you, feller?"

IN ANSWER Jim brought out the silver star he secretly carried in his belt. He held it in his palm, the thin band of silver

encircling the lone star glinting with a cold and implacable authority known throughout Texas.

"The name's Jim Hatfield— Texas Ranger!"

"Hatfield!" It was Ball Hotchkiss who breathed the name, his eyes were bright chips of glass in the lamplight. "The Lone Wolf?"

Jim shrugged. "The real Matt Singleton was a Texas Ranger up to a few days ago," he explained. "A good one, too. He kept his past to himself. We were on a job together when he got a load of buckshot in the side. Knowing he was dying, he told me about the money. Said he had a rendezvous here, today, May 17th, with the two other holdup men who had survived the train robbery. Cory Bates and Oley Jones. He told me how they had buried the money out in the Soapstone badlands. Each man had a map, and each man's map was essential to locating the money. Without one man's map the other two would be no good. That's how Oley Jones, holdup boss, had planned it, and that's why they had arranged to meet here in Quito, ten years to the day. They figured that the holdup would be forgotten and they could split the money between them and spend it without arousing suspicion."

Ball let out a slow breath. "Is that why you came to town?"

Hatfield nodded. "The money rightly belongs to Wells Fargo. It's buried in Texas soil, which brings it under Texas jurisdiction. I took Matt's place, hoping to meet Jones and Bates and take them and the money into custody. But things didn't work out as planned. Bates showed up all right, but someone killed him. And Oley Jones never did make the rendezvous."

"Bates is dead?" the girl asked.

Jim nodded. "I thought at first it might be Oley Jones who killed Bates. Though I couldn't figure out how Jones could come to Quito without being seen. Now I'm not sure. It could have been your brother, Miriam. He knew Bates was one of the holdup men. And it was your brother who slugged me, up in Bates's room."

"No!" Miriam Steele lifted a hand to her mouth. "Jeff's wild! But he wouldn't do that!"

"He likes peppermints," Jim said coldly. "The man who slugged me was chewing on a peppermint." He turned to Ball. "Where's Jeff now?"

The stableman made a shrugging motion. "Hell, I don't know! He had a run-in with Big Mack and some of Bettes's boys in the Aces High. Pock-faced gunster took Jeff's gun from him and Big Mack beat hell out of him. Jeff stumbled in here and I helped clean him up. He slept for a while up in the loft— he had just come down when you showed up, Ranger."

"And he heard me tell you I was Matt Singleton," Jim added evenly. "What did he do then?"

"I don't know," Ball growled. "I left him here and went over to the restaurant to eat. I wanted to bring him some food, but he said he didn't want any. When I got back he was gone."

"Jeff came to Quito to see Bettes," the girl said. "That's what he told us. But Dad was worried. That's why I came after him. Jeff said he was sure the men who raided our stock were Bettes's men. He said he had recognized Big Mack, from his bulk, even though it was dark when they tore our corral gate loose."

"Every shady character in the section works for Dave Bettes," Ball rasped. "He's got a ranch up by Dry Creek. That's what he calls it. Hideout is a better name for it. The Crosshatch's been losing beef, but so far they haven't done too much about it."

Jim frowned. "Maybe your brother went home, Miriam. I'd like to see your father, anyway. May I see you home?"

The girl smiled. "I'd feel much safer if you would, now that I know who you are." She turned to Ball. "If Jeff should come back here—"

"I'll send him home," the stableman said. "You'd better leave the buggy here. I'll see that axle gets fixed first thing in the morning. I'll saddle the pinto for you, Miriam."

The girl said: "Prince! Where is the dog, Ball?"

"Somewhere around in back," the stableman said impatiently. "Hunting rats. I'll take care of him for you." He made a wry gesture. "I can stand him around here for a few days."

THE Lone Wolf and the girl rode away from Ball's Stables five minutes later. As a precaution Ball let them out through the back gate in the corral which put them in the shadows of the arroyo which angled southeast out of the wash. Ball stood by the gate and watched them vanish and was mildly surprised that no one had come looking for Hatfield.

Then he turned and walked back to the street and tried to figure out why Dave Bettes had made no fuss over Hatfield's escape. He didn't like it. He felt nervous and his eyes held a wary gleam, like those of a cat backed into a corner.

He went back to his quarters and threw some cans and supplies into a gunny sack and then went into the barn and saddled the big gray mule he used whenever he left town. He rode out the same way Hatfield and the girl had gone, but he turned north once he got well out of town. An hour later he was skirting the crinkled lava beds which tongued out of the badlands. He followed along the edges of this barrier for several miles, passing up numerous gullies leading back into this black and forbidding mass.

Finally he turned into one of the fissures seemingly no different from the others. He rode slowly, following this narrow, twisting crack in the huge lava field for about a mile.

The fissure widened to a small pocket under a burnt, ugly hill. The small fire came into view only when Ball rounded the last jut of lava. He rode forward at a slow, cautious pace.

The fire barely lightened an area ten feet in diameter. No one was in sight, but Hotchkiss rode boldly up to its glow and dismounted. He waited, looking down into the flames— a paunchy, stoop-shouldered man with a glint in his eyes.

Jeff Steele edged out of the shadows. He came up to the fire and his voice was edgy. "Trouble?"

Ball shrugged. "The big feller you slugged up in Bates's room knows it was you up there." His voice was tight. "You and your damn peppermints. If you stuck to tobacco, like a man—" He broke off and made a disgusted sound.

Jeff's lower lip jutted out. "I got the map from him, didn't I? Bates was dead when I got to his room. Been dead an hour, I'd say. He'd been shot in the stomach and chest. I searched him but there was nothing in his pockets. Then this Matt Singleton knocked on the door."

"You should have killed him," Ball said thinly. "Now he knows you were there. He's looking for you. He wants that money, Jeff."

"To hell with him!" Jeff snarled. "Pop spent six stinking years in that hell hole at Yuma. Six years for nothing. He worked for the Santa Fé railroad for eleven years. And they paid him off by calling him a liar and making a scapegoat out of him. He earned that one hundred thousand dollars, Ball— and by hell I'm going to get it for him!"

Ball's eyes narrowed. "He came around to see me, kid. And he claims he's a Texas Ranger. Showed me a badge to back him up. He convinced your sister, and she took him to meet your folks."

Jeff's jaw corded. "A Ranger?"

Ball shrugged. "Thought you oughta know. He claims there were three maps. Cory Bates had one, he had one, and a man named Oley Jones. They were the three survivors of the holdup ten years ago. They buried the money out in the Soapstones somewhere, and each man made out a portion of the map to the cache. Takes all three maps to find it, or nobody finds it." Ball shook his head. "That's what he told us, Jeff. But you say you've got only one map, the one the Ranger had?"

Jeff nodded. "I told you. Bates didn't have anything on him except some change. Somebody got his map, then. Maybe this Oley Jones."

"Jones hasn't shown up," Ball muttered.

Jeff frowned. "The hell with it! I've got one map, anyway. And as long as I have it, no one else is going to pick up that hundred thousand dollars!"

"Reckon that's the way it is," Ball nodded. He tossed the gunny sack down by the fire. "Brought you some grub. Stay clear of town for a while. And—" his tone lowered— "next time I come I probably will have company—"

Jeff listened intently, nodding, his eyes bright. "I'll be waiting," he muttered. His hand slid down over his Colt butt. "Nobody's going to get that money, Ball, nobody except me!"

CHAPTER VI

A Woman's Bitterness

THE Drag 7 horse ranch lay east of Quito, on a windy bench with the mass of Tortilla Butte blotting out the southern sky. From its wide veranda a man could see a long way across the broken country to the uplands of New Mexico. Behind the butte, across the burning, lava-studded sink called the Soapstone badlands, a man could make Mexico in less than two days.

The Drag 7 was a horse spread that showed careful planning. Even in the night Jim could see some of the long-range improvements. The two windpumps and the wide fenced pastures watered by storage tanks.

Some of the background of the Drag 7 Miriam told Hatfield as they rode through the star-studded night.

"Dad always loved horses," she said. "I think I share that love, too. When we came here Mother wanted to settle in town. But Dad thought it would be too obvious. A cranky old man named Abe Jenkins owned this place, or rather the tumbledown shack and rickety corral that was here before. He wanted to sell out and we bought this place for five hundred dollars. That's about all the money we had.

"Jenkins was trapping wild horses for a living. He told us about the bands roaming south of here and dad and Jeff went after them. Most of the horses they caught were pretty poor specimens. But once in a while they brought in some magnificent animals. Dad sold a few horses to an Army remount buyer and picked up a contract to supply Fort Milton. We don't entirely depend on what we trap, of course, Dad raises horses here and we buy some, too. Mr. Havens, of Crosshatch, sees us every fall for animals for his remuda, too."

Jim nodded. The girl was good company, and in the darkness off yonder he heard the yipping of a coyote. The stars hung low and bright in the blue-black sky and the moon was a thick orange crescent low in the west. He could see a long way over the flats, but the lights of Quito were lost behind them.

"We aren't making a lot of money, Jim," she continued. "But Dad's happier here than he ever was working for Santa Fé. If only Jeff would forget that money."

Jim changed the subject. "You say you were raided the other night?"

"Yes. We had about twenty five mares in the south pasture. The raiders tore down our fence and drove them off. Jeff thought he recognized Big Mack." She bit her lips. "One of the mares they stole was my favorite. Fantasy, I call her. A strawberry roan with four white stockings. Jeff wanted to get her back especially."

"She should be easy to recognize," Jim said. "If Big Mack has your mare—"

"He'll swear it's his," the girl said grimly. "You see, we didn't brand her. I couldn't stand seeing the hot iron and—call it foolish sentiment, Jim— but Fantasy is more than a horse to me."

She rode in silence after that and Jim let her alone with her thoughts. They came into the yard, their horse's hoofs ringing on the hard ground. A wind was stirring off the far land westward. It blew hard and dry and hot and the girl whispered, "Looks like another sirocco, Jim, when the wind blows like that from the New Mexican uplands."

"Sirocco?"

She colored, but it was hidden in the darkness. "I read a lot, Jim. Sirocco is a dry wind that blows from North Africa across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Italy. Sometimes it blows for days— it's dry and hot and it makes for edgy tempers."

The door opened and light splashed across the wide veranda and down the steps, spraying the feet of their horses. A man moved into the doorway, his shadow blotting out most of the light.

"Dad! It's me, Miriam!"

The man came out to the porch, easing away from the lighted doorway, merging with the darkness under the overhand. He held a rifle in his hands. He propped it muzzle up against the wall and turned to them, his voice gruff.

"Where's Jeff?"

Miriam's answer was slow in coming. "I don't know. Still looking for our horses, I imagine."

"Not Jeff!" the older man said. His voice held a certain bitterness. "He's not that crazy about horses!" Then he came to the edge of the veranda and looked Jim over, his expression hidden in the darkness.

"Who's he?"

"This is Jim Hatfield, Dad," Miriam replied. She slid out of saddle. "He's a Texas Ranger. He's come for the Wells Fargo money."

Brandon Steele stiffened. "You, too?" He came around to the head of the stairs and now the starlight showed him to Jim. There were bags under Brandon's eyes and deep furrows in his sun-blackened, weathered face. He wore a straight gray mustache under a thin hook of a nose and his mouth was tight, lipless line. A hard man on the long side of forty, perhaps— he looked even older, and Jim remembered the six years at Yuma.

"Come in," Steele invited and stepped back inside the house.

A FRAIL-LOOKING, stoop-shouldered woman with iron gray hair pulled back in a tight, severe bun on the nape of her thin neck stood in the big living room furnished with several pieces of horse-hair stuffed furniture. Several Navajo blankets were pinned to the walls, adding a brightness and gaiety to the room. Straw mats were laid over the wide board floor.

She stood by the small table where a tintype of the family, possibly eleven or twelve years old was mounted in an oval frame. Brandon Steele and this woman stood in stiff pose while two youngsters in starched clothes stared wide-eyed into the camera lens.

She was an angular, harsh-mouthed woman now, but in the picture she had a softness and a hint of sweetness and her posture was straight. Watching her, Jim could see the changes Brandon's six years at Yuma had wrought in her.

She came to Miriam, her voice harsh and unfriendly. "Where's Jeff?" she ignored Jim altogether. "Where is he, Miriam?"

The girl seemed to shrink from her mother, as from an uplifted hand. "I didn't find him. But Mr. Hotchkiss said that Jeff had been in town, looking for the men who stole our horses."

"Horses!" Contempt rang in her voice. "Horses! Will horses ever pay for the misery I suffered? For the shame?" She shook her finger under Miriam's nose, her bitterness shrilling her voice. "No. Jeff isn't out looking for horses, for your previous mare. He's after our money, Miriam. You hear!" She whirled on Jim. "I heard Miriam say you were after the money. But that money is ours! We paid for it in tears and shame."

"Lucy, Lucy." Brandon put his arm around her. She stiffened and drew away from him, but he pulled her around gently. "Take the Ranger to the kitchen, Miriam," he suggested. "Perhaps he'd like some coffee and pie. I'll join you soon."

"I want my son!" Lucy Steele cried. "I want Jeff, you hear! He's my boy. He knows what I've been through, how I've suffered."

Jim watched them disappear toward the bedroom. He followed Miriam into the

kitchen, feeling grimy and unkempt and uncomfortable with the guns weighing against his thighs. She took his hat and hung it on a prong while he washed at the kitchen sink, pumping water into a tin basin.

When he was clean he sat at the big round table and Miriam brought coffee and a huge wedge of dried apple pie. She took a cup for herself and joined him, and she looked less boyish in the lamplight, with her hair loosened over her shoulders.

"Mother's never forgotten those years," she said sadly. Her smile was tremulous. She was hurt, her mother had shown her utter disregard of her daughter in front of a stranger, had made her seem unwanted and guilty and though she tried to hide it behind her smile and her words Jim sensed the deep pain in her.

"I hate that money!" she said in a sudden burst of feeling. "It's ruined our lives. We used to be a happy family, Jim. And then dad was sent to prison and mother changed. And she changed Jeff, too."

Dear Sirs: After using your hair restorer for only one month . . .

Outside the wind had picked up and grit tapped against the kitchen windows. There was more than the sound of the grit— there was a far off wailing sound in the wind, like a woman lost in bottomless grief.

Jim could think of nothing to say to her. He thought of the money buried out there somewhere, of how that money trapped people. Two men had died in the taking of it—Voss Grant and Rocky Cal-

lahan. Matt was dead, too, and so was Cory Bates. And perhaps Oley Jones was, too. All of them tied in one way or another to that money. And the Steeles, the money had trapped them, also.

"Dad brought us here because of mother and Jeff," she said. She sat stiffly, looking down into her cup, as though she felt ashamed to let Jim see the hurt in her again. "He came because of the money, Jim. But he changed his mind. He's forgotten those terrible years at Yuma. Dad and I have come to like it here. It's clean and bright and no one knows us. We have our horses and a good living. If only Jeff and mother could see that what we have is more than money."

Jim nodded. "I reckon a lot of folks lose sight of what they have and want something else." He was thinking of the hard-faced boy he had encountered in Ball's Stables— he knew what had shaped Jeff now.

Brandon came to join them in the kitchen. His face looked tired. "Lucy's upset," he apologized. "She's worried over Jeff. You'll excuse her, Mr. Hatfield?"

"Of course." The Lone Wolf shook his head. "I don't know how you feel about that money, Brandon. Your daughter has told me what happened. You have every reason to be bitter. Six years is a long time to pay for something you didn't do."

Brandon smiled. The hard line of his lips had been fashioned by those years at Yuma, and they didn't smile, but his eyes did in a sad sort of way. "The first year in prison I hated everyone. I would have killed the prosecutor who built up the circumstantial evidence that convinced the jury I was in with the holdup men. I would have killed the judge and every one of the jurors, too." He sighed and reached in his flannel shirt pocket for the pipe he carried there; his eyes had a dark brooding look as he remembered.

"By the end of six years I still hated everyone. But not in the same way. I was pretty beaten then. All I really wanted was to get out. Well, I got out on parole. I found my eleven year old son almost grown, and my daughter a young woman. But Lucy had changed, too. She never got over my being sent to prison. She had moved from where we lived, and she and Jeff had kept track of every news story printed about the holdup. It narrowed things down to Quito, to the Soapstone badlands. The trail, had vanished beyond Quito. So we made a guess that the holdup men must have buried the money somewhere and split up. We had no way of knowing if they had not already returned and picked it up— after all it was more than six years later when we got here. But Lucy and Jeff insisted we come. Lucy had a stubborn conviction that the money was still buried around Quito, and that the thieves would come back some day and we'd know them. She feels, blindly, that the money is rightfully ours now."

"And you?" Jim asked the question levelly.

BRANDON shrugged. "I don't want the money. All I want is to live in peace here. I've always liked horses. I like to raise them. Here we've had luck trapping some pretty fine mustangs. Once in a while we catch one like that strawberry roan of Miriam's—Fantasy. A real horse, Hatfield, a fine animal."

Jim nodded. "But you're having trouble with horse thieves?"

"Not often." Brandon made a wry gesture. "But once in a while Bettes's boys get anxious for new mounts. They're a hard, clanny bunch, Hatfield. And I have a hunch most of them are wanted men using Dave's place up by Dry Creek as a hideout. Bill Havens over at Crosshatch has been losing beef and getting riled, but the sheriff is too far away to give much protection. The smaller spreads are losing stock, too. But they can't do much about it. And every once in a while a stage is held up." He shook his head. "Dave Bettes unofficially runs Quito. He's a self-appointed justice of the peace, whatever that means, legally, and he's appointed that gunslinger, Vic Arness, as his special deputy. I don't know how he

managed it, but he has the sanction of the sheriff's office. Probably because this county is too big and wild for Sheriff Ventley and he's glad to have someone represent the law here. About all Dave and Vic do is collect taxes, or throw some drunken puncher in jail after a night in Quito and fine him in the morning."

Jim frowned, his thoughts working on an angle which had just occurred to him. "This Bettes? How long has he been in Quito?"

"He was here when we came, more than three years ago. Don't know how long he had been here before that. Why?"

Jim shrugged. "A hunch." He told Brandon why he had come to Quito. "You were right about the money being cached out in the Soapstones, Brandon. But this is how they worked it." He explained about the maps. "Cory Bates showed up in town first and was killed. Whoever killed him was after the map he had on him. When I went up to his room I was slugged." He met Brandon's frowning gaze with searching regard. "It was Jeff who slugged me, Brandon. He was in that room, with Bates's body."

Brandon took this as though he had been backhanded across the face. His lips whitened; he glanced at Miriam who licked her lips. "I didn't see Jeff at all," she whispered. "When I got to town I went straight to Bettes's office. He laughed at me, and said Jeff had gotten into a fight with Big Mack." She lowered her gaze to the table. "There was some trouble with his deputy and Jim— Mr. Hatfield— interceded. I didn't wait to see what happened. I went to see Ball Hotchkiss and he said Jeff had just left him."

Brandon groaned. "He's a wild one, Jim. Slick fast with a gun and cocky, too. He'll run up against the wrong kind of man some day and—"

"I hope he never does," Jim cut in evenly. "I don't think, now, that your son killed Bates. But he was there when I walked in, and I think he's got the map Matt gave me."

Brandon's voice was thick, helpless. "So help me, Ranger, I don't want that money. When I see Jeff—"

"I rather Jeff had that map!" Jim interrupted curtly. "My job is to find him and convince him he's better off forgetting about that money. The law made a mistake in your case, Brandon. But claiming that money would be a greater mistake. I've got to find Jeff before the man who killed Bates does. I've got a hunch that Oley Jones killed Cory Bates, that somehow Jones managed to come to Quito without being seen."

Brandon's hands clenched. "Get that money off my mind, Jim, and I'll be thanking you for the rest of my days. It's done nothing but cause bitterness here. I'm worried about my son. He's hard and fancies himself a fast gun. He's walking that narrow line right now, Jim— that edge between right and wrong."

Jim rose. "Thanks for the talk, Brandon. I wanted you to know my position in this. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me keep on being Matt Singleton, until I get to the bottom of things here. As I hope Ball Hotchkiss will keep my secret, too."

"He will!" the girl said with quiet conviction. "He's been our friend since we came to this part of Texas. He's the only one who knows about father."

Brandon held out his hand. "I'd ask you to stay the night, Jim. But there's only Jeff's room, and Lucy would—"

Jim grinned. "I should be back in town, anyway. Thanks for the coffee, and the apple pie, Miriam."

The girl blushed. "Mom baked the pie," she said. "I wish I could say I had." She held out her hand. "I don't know what you think of me, Jim. I didn't even thank you for helping when Vic manhandled me."

"You helped more than enough when you slipped that gun into Dave's back room," Jim said. "I bet he's still worrying how I got hold of it." He paused on the veranda and put on his hat. "I'll try to straighten things out with Jeff, Brandon. And I'll keep an eye out for your roan, Miriam. Fantasy, you call her?"

"She's that, to me," the girl said, and her eyes had a faraway sparkle. "This is a place for dreams, Jim. And I often day dream best in saddle."

"I hope all your dreams come true," the Long Wolf said. "Good night."

They stood on the wide porch, father and daughter, and watched the big Ranger step into saddle on the golden stallion. Brandon's eyes held admiration. "That's some horse he's riding, Miriam."

"And some man riding him," she murmured. She stood stiff-faced then, under her father's knowing scrutiny. She heard him sigh.

"You're not like Jeff," he said slowly. "The years didn't hurt you, or make you bitter. I've been thankful for that, girl. And I don't want to see you hurt. But you'll get hurt, if you dream about him." He saw the muscles of her cheeks quiver and he went on ruthlessly, though it hurt him to say it. "He's that kind, Miriam—a lone wolf. He rides the long trails alone, and that's the way it will always be with him." Brandon took a slow breath.

"Texas can be thankful for that, Miriam."

CHAPTER VII

Midnight Run-in

IT WAS a few minutes after midnight when Jim returned to Quito. The wind was in his face all the way, dry and gritty—it was some unseen brittle thing pushing against him, wailing overhead.

He was glad to see Quito ahead of him, a dark scatter of buildings with only a light or two probing the murky darkness. Evidently Quito retired early, he thought. There was little to do in a town like Quito after dark, what night life there was probably took place in the saloon and he was not particularly surprised, therefore, to see that the Aces High lights were still on.

He turned Goldy in Ball's stable yard and dismounted. There was no light burning in Hotchkiss's living quarters which were tacked on to the northern end of the frame structure. But there was a dim light inside the barn. Jim led Goldy up the ramp and inside he unsaddled the sorrel and turned him into an empty stall. He gave the stallion a quick rubdown and forked some hay into the bin and measured out a half bucket of oats from an open feed sack. He heard Miriam's terrier, Prince, snort from the darkness beyond and Jim grinned.

He found a bucket and went out into the yard and pumped water into it. The wind stung his face. He came back and put the bucket down for Goldy and in the next stall a big gray mule lifted his head over the boards and snorted loudly. Jim eyed the wrinkled lips and bared teeth. He walked over and patted the thick shaggy neck and surprise narrowed his gaze. He reached over and ran his hand down the mule's side, finding the animal still warm and damp and he knew that the mule had been ridden and only recently turned into this stall.

Then he heard a soft step behind him and he turned to face Hotchkiss in underwear, pants and socks. The man had his shotgun in his hands, and there was a harsh light in his eyes.

"Looking for something, Ranger?"

Jim shook his head. "I came back and didn't see a light in your place," he explained. "Didn't want to disturb you so I took care of Goldy myself."

"Obliged," the stableman said. "But I'm a light sleeper, as I told you." He shuffled up, his left heel showing through a hole in his sock. He reached out and gently pushed the mule's muzzle and the animal whickered eagerly. "Go to sleep, Sampson," he growled, and turned to Jim. "Sampson don't look like much, but he can outlast most horses in this country."

"I believe you," Jim said shortly. Someone had ridden this mule tonight, but Ball evidently was not going to mention it. Hatfield shrugged. "Sorry I wakened you, Ball. See you in the morning."

The stableman asked: "Are you gonna stay in town?" There was surprise in his voice.

"Why not?"

"Well, I thought, with Bettes having put you in jail. And you having had trouble with Vic—"

"I have a hunch Dave Bettes knows he made a mistake," Jim said coldly. "I don't think he or his deputy will try it again."

Ball eyed the big man facing him. He nodded slowly. "I don't think he will, either. Might be a good thing, though, that Bettes's boys left town this afternoon. That is, that pock-faced killer and Monte. But Big Mack's still in town. He's been drinking all day, and he gets mean instead of drunk. I thought I'd tell you, Ranger."

"Big Mack? Is he the man Jeff tangled with?"

Ball nodded glumly. "Kid didn't have a chance to use his Colt. That pock-faced gunslinger jammed a gun against his back and took Jeff's gun from him. Then Big Mack went to work on Jeff." The stableman ran his knuckles across his chin. "There was three horses tied up at the saloon rack when Jeff came to town this morning. One was a strawberry roan mare with four white stockings. Big Mack claimed the animal belonged to him. Jeff called him a liar and said he stole it from his sister."

"Well, it could be," Jim murmured.

"I didn't see the animal," Ball muttered. "And from what Jeff told me, they hadn't put a brand on the horse. If it came down to it, it would be his sister's word against Big Mack's."

"I see," Jim said. "And a lady's word doesn't count for much in Quito."

Ball scowled. "Only thing that counts in Quito is a fast gun."

Jim made a little gesture. "See you in the morning, Ball." He stepped out and down the ramp and Ball came to the door and watched the big man stride to the street.

"So you're the Lone Wolf?" he muttered. "Well, you'll have your chance to howl, Ranger. Quito is loaded with curly wolves, and they all have fangs. Hope yours are sharp, Hatfield."

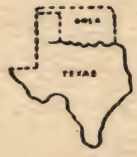
THE wind had a sullen sound in town. Out on the flats it had moaned like a woman in distress; here it had an angry mutter, like a man searching for the lover who had run away with his wife.

Jim's boots clopped hollowly on the plankwalk. He was coming up to the saloon when the windows of the Aces High suddenly went dark. He paused, a tall man in the shadows, suddenly alert.

There was an alleyway betewen him and the saloon— a passageway for wagons bringing supplies to the Aces High storehouse. It probably led to a loading platform in back.

From the shrouding blackness of this alley a horse neighed in anger and fright and a man's thick, angry voice lashed out.

A SMALL TEXAS TALE



NAME YOUR POISON

THE VISITOR from New York came down to the small Texas coastal town for a short vacation. The first morning there, he decided he'd go for a swim. He crossed the beach and approached a local character there, busy surf fishing.

"Any alligators here?" asked the visitor.

"No, sir," answered the local resident. "I never seen none."

The tourist removed his beach robe and plunged into the water. Swimming out about a hundred yards, he felt something brush his leg.

"Hey! Are you sure there are no alligators out here?" he called back.

"Positive," the character calmly replied. "Too many sharks around."

—Howie Lasseter

"Come on, you red bitch! Hold still, or I'll break your damn neck!"

There was a flurry of movement, the thudding of a man's fist against a horse's ribs. Jim came to his toes, his mouth crimping harshly.

There was movement in the shadows at the mouth of the alley. Then a huge man came out into the starshine of the street, pulling hard on the bridle of a horse. He was holding the animal by the bit iron and he was powerful enough to hold the mare down, keep it from rearing and striking at him. He had his right hand clenched and his fist thumped against the mare's ribs again.

Jim could see that the horse was a strawberry roan with four white stockings, and it occurred to him that Big Mack must have taken the Drag 7 mare around to the back yard after his run-in with Jeff. Probably as a precaution against Jeff's trying to steal the animal back from him.

Even as he watched the mare jerked sharply and broke Big Mack's grip. She reared then and struck at him and the big man barely evaded those trim forefeet. He lurched aside and the mare whirled and went pounding down the street.

"Come back, you—" Big Mack's swearing took a sudden deadly turn. He drew his Colt and was aiming at the fleeing animal when Hatfield's quick snapshot spun the gun from his hand.

The shot seemed to racket through town, whipped by the wind. The big man turned quickly, like some startled grizzly. He saw Jim move out to the edge of the boardwalk and he stared at him, realization working slowly across his broad, brutish features.

"That's no way to treat a horse," Jim said coldly. "Especially a horse you don't own."

Big Mack lurched toward the Lone Wolf. He stood a few inches taller, but he was thicker through the chest and waist and his arms were like wagon tongues. He looked like a man who could bend a horseshoe between his hands—and had.

"You meddling fool!" he snarled. "I'm gonna take that gun away from you and jam it down your throat!"

"Go sleep it off, fellow," Jim advised bleakly.

"The name's Big Mack!" the man sneered. "And I'm gonna beat the living hell out of you."

"You mouth's bigger than you are!" Jim snapped. He thrust his Colt back into holster and stepped off the walk to meet the man.

Big Mack lunged forward, bringing his balled fist around in a vicious roundhouse swing for Jim's face. The Lone Wolf ducked and buried his fist in Big Mack's stomach, elbowed him under the chin with the same arm and in a quick upward jolt and pivoted around with an open-handed slap to the man's face.

It was a contemptuous handling of the bully and it shook Big Mack's confidence more than it hurt him. He stood braced on wide-spread feet, his face stinging, his head buzzing slightly. He had bitten his lip and blood trickled down his chin. He wiped it away.

"A fancy Dan, eh?" he growled. "Just for that I'll break you in two!"

The shot seemed to have aroused no one, or if it had no one bothered to investigate. There were only the two of them in the street in front of the darkened saloon, and the sullen wind swirling dust.

Jim said harshly, "If you had any sense you'd quit now and go sleep it off."

Big Mack lunged for him again. He was more cunning this time. He tried to grapple with Hatfield, get hold of him so that he could bring his greater weight and his massive strength into play.

The Lone Wolf stepped sidewise, felt Big Mack's fingers claw at his shirt and he struck down sharply with the edge of his palm on the other's forearm. Big Mack grunted with pain and drew his hand back and Jim stepped in and belted him a quick one, two in the mouth. He stepped away before Big Mack's outreaching hands could close on him. The man stumbled and Jim came in again, driving his blows, getting the solid pivot

of his wide shoulders behind them.

Big Mack's wheezy grunts were audible above the wind. He was spun around and his knees got rubbery. But a stubborn range held him up. He pawed at Jim like some tormented grizzly and the Lone Wolf hammered at him, wanting to end it now.

Big Mack's nose broke under the impact of one of Jim's blows. Blood spilled down his face and dripped over his shirt and was sucked up by the dry earth underfoot. He wiped at his face with the back of his sleeve and tried to find the shadowy figure who moved like a jungle cat and hit like the kick of a mule.

Jim finally caught him with a solid smash under the left ear. Big Mack stumbled and his hands dropped and Jim belted him on the side of the jaw. Big Mack turned all the way around and fell across the walk, his face banging on the boards.

Hatfield brushed hair back from his eyes and sucked in gulps of air. The big man had taken a lot of punishment, but Jim remembered Jeff Steele's face and the way this man had treated Miriam's mare and he had no regrets. He found his hat which had been knocked off during the fight and set it on his head. Then he walked to the unconscious man, not wanting to leave him lying there—he was bending over Big Mack when he heard a man clear his throat cautiously and the Lone Wolf whirled, a Peacemaker appearing as by magic in his hand.

The man in the saloon doorway was a thin shadow . . . he shrank away from the menace of Jim's gun.

The big Ranger snapped: "Come out where I can get a look at you!"

The figure moved out to the edge of the walk. He was a thin, balding man still wearing a bartender's wet apron. He had his hands clasped on his head, indicating his pacifist inclinations.

Jim relaxed slightly. "Is he a friend of yours?"

The bartender shrugged. "Big Mack drinks here. He's one of Dave Bettes's riders." And added softly, "Dave owns this saloon. I only work for him."

Jim nodded. "In case you didn't see it, I'm telling you how it happened. He was maltreating a horse that didn't belong to him. I stopped him." Hatfield walked over to where Big Mack's Colt lay in the street. He picked it up, ejected the five rounds, thrust these in his pocket and came back to hand the gun to the bartender.

"Give it to him later. If he still wants to take this up in the morning, tell him I'll be in Quito all day."

He moved away with this, heading for the Mesa House looming darkly across the street.

LEON HAGGARD, the bartender, waited until the big man stirred. Big Mack groaned and pawed at the boards and finally flopped over on his back. The bartender made no move to help him. He had no love for Big Mack.

He heard someone move in the dark empty sawdusted room behind him and he turned; he was not too surprised when Dave Bettes loomed up. The man didn't look any cleaner in night clothes. He had on long underwear and socks and the flat-crowned hat and his left cheek bulged.

Haggard wondered with sour interest if Bettes slept with that chaw and that hat, he had never seen his boss without either.

He could smell Bettes even at the distance separating them, but he kept from showing his displeasure. The man had a nasty disposition at any time.

"Thought I heard a shot," Bettes growled. He looked down at Big Mack, then muttering with stark amazement, he bent over his rider. "Hell! It's Big Mack. What happened?"

"Ran into someone he couldn't lick!" Haggard muttered. He stiffened at the anger he sensed in Bettes's face. "Hell, I was closing up, Dave. Finally got Big Mack to leave. He went out the back way for that mare he had put in the shed, and I put out the lights and was coming upstairs when I heard a shot." He shrugged. "I came out in time to see this big feller whip hell out of Big Mack!"

"Big? How big?"

"Well, not as big as Mack. But big enough." Haggard described Jim. "Don't know what happened. I could hear Big Mack having trouble with that red mare. Then there was a shot. When I got out here the mare was gone, and Big Mack was getting belted around."

Big Mack's voice was thick with swallowed blood. "I'll kill the snake." He was getting up, a shambling, wobbly man. He staggered and fell against the side of the saloon and braced himself, pawing at the blood on his face. "I'll kill the son—" But there was no conviction in his shaky voice.

"You damn fool!" Bettes snarled. "I told you to get back to the ranch with Utah. If you had listened to me—"

"I do what I want!" Big Mack mumbled. He reached for his Colt in a blind surge of anger and fumbled at the empty holster for several seconds before he realized he was weaponless.

Bettes caught hold of himself. He couldn't push this man too far, he knew. As he knew he couldn't push the others. But he might be able to use him.

"Leon, help him up to Vic's room. He'll stay there for the night." He heard Haggard's thin question and he snapped, "Vic's out of town, that nester's wife," and then turned back to Big Mack who was protesting thickly. "Shut up! You're in no shape to ride. It looks like you met the Santa Fé Express headon. Get upstairs with Leon. Do what I say and you might get a chance to get even with that guy who handed you this beating."

Big Mack pushed away from the wall. "I got sand in my eyes," he mumbled. "Couldn't see him. Next time I'll—"

"Yeah, yeah— next time," Dave taunted coldly. He waited until Big Mack stumbled off into the darkness of the saloon behind Leon. He stood scowling, an incongruous figure in his longjohns and black hat, peering across the murky street.

"Maybe you're just a tough hombre on the run, feller," he muttered. "And maybe you're something else. We'll find out in the morning."

He wanted to talk to Vic Arness, but the deputy had ridden out of town right after they had jailed the man who called himself Matt Singleton. Dave knew where Vic had gone—where he went periodically, tipped off by some arrangement only he seemed to know. There was a nester's wife down along one of the Sweetwater's feeders whose husband sometimes had to go to Caldwell for an overnight stay.

"Damn these young goats," he muttered. "He'll walk into a load of buckshot one night," he prophesized sourly.

He went back inside the saloon, closing and barring the door. He crossed the empty room still reeking with sour beer smell and stale tobacco and opened the small door leading to the storeroom in back.

A figure stirred in the darkness and a cot creaked. Bettes called, "Lou!"

"Yeah?" There was a trace of temper in the sleepy voice. Bettes pictured the lanky, white-haired bum who swamped out the saloon and his voice hardened. "I want you to ride out to the ranch tonight. I want you to get Utah and Monte back to town. You tell them I want them in Quito by noon."

Lou muttered rebelliously.

"They better be here, Lou!" Dave said viciously, and slammed the door. He knew Lou would do as he was told.

CHAPTER VIII

Strange Letter

JIM HATFIELD woke with a hazy sun slanting its light through his window. It turned the flimsy curtains into shabby strips of cloth which fluttered like some dismal trapped thing against the sill.

The wind still blew outside that window and sand had sifted across the floor in a thin coating of gray. Jim's lips felt dry. He rolled over and stood up and stretched. He had slept with the door locked and his guns close at hand—and he was a light sleeper.

He had been given a room closer to the

head of the stairs, overlooking the street—a room, the desk clerk had explained hurriedly, which had just been vacated that evening. Jim knew the man had lied. The staleness of this cubicle was of long standing.

As he dressed Jim looked into the cracked mirror, seeing a face that looked gaunt behind the three day stubble and his black hair curled on the back of his neck. He had left his warbag in Dave's office, and his shaving gear was in it—he thought of this and the vague plan that had formed in his mind during the ride back to town from the Steele ranch seemed suddenly clear now, as though his mind had worked on it during the night.

More than ever he was convinced that Jeff had not killed Bates. That it had been Oley Jones who had shot Cory. Oley Jones was in Quito, hiding behind the innocent facade of one of Quito's citizens. It had to be that way. Jones, a stranger, could not have come to Quito without being instantly noticed, as he had been, and Cory. But Oley Jones, living in Quito under another name, could easily have gone up the Mesa House's back stairs and waited in Cory's room—as he had intended, no doubt, to wait for Matt when Matt showed up.

Dave Bettes? The man fitted loosely the description Matt had gven him, allowing for the passage of ten years. It could be Bettes, but Jim had to make sure.

"Well, if that's not you hissing—then, who is it?"

He came down into the dingy lobby with its dusty potted palms and brass cuspidors and saw that Kenny, the desk clerk, was talking to a shaggy-haired oldster who kept shaking his head with mulish stubborness.

"I can't take it back. There's no return address on it." His voice sounded peevish. "When did this feller Bates die?"

Jim turned to the desk. Kenny looked up at him and frowned.

"Something for my friend Cory Bates?" Jim asked pleasantly.

The old man turned to look at him. "You know him?"

"I was his friend," Jim said.

"I'm Pop Wilkins" the oldster grumbled. "Run the feed store down the block. I generally get over to Caldwell once a week for feed and I pick up the mail for Quito. What there is of it. Got a letter for a Cory Bates, addressed to him at the Mesa House. But Kenny tells me Bates is dead."

"That's right," Jim said. He held out his hand. "I'll take the letter for him."

"Whoa!" Pop said, backing away and putting his hand with the letter behind his back. "Just a minute, young feller. I got no right to hand you a piece of United States mail that ain't addressed to you."

"Is there a return address on it?" Jim demanded coldly.

"Well—no there ain't."

"In that case you can't return it, can you," Jim said. "That means the letter remains here, as part of Mr. Bates's personal property. As his only living friend and relative, and therefore his heir," Jim continued firmly, "I am legally entitled to examine and dispose of his personal and worldly goods."

Pop plucked at his scraggly beard in confusion. "Well, I don't know." He turned to Kenny for support. The desk clerk was staring in open-mouthed wonder at Jim. "Is this hombre telling the truth, Kenny?" Pop demanded. His voice indicated that Kenny's testimony would be of paramount importance. "Is he a friend of this Bates hombre?"

Kenny nodded weakly. "He said he was."

Jim took the letter from Pop. "I'll give you a receipt for this, Mr. Wilkins," he said crisply. He turned to Kenny. "A piece of notepaper, if you please!"

Kenny obeyed. Jim used the scratchy register pen and scribbled out a receipt, heading it To Whom It May Concern.

Pop took it and scratched his head. "Reckon it's all right," he mumbled. He walked away, shaking his head.

"By the way," Jim asked Kenny, "where is my deceased friend, Mr. Bates?"

"On a slab in Gus Myers's shed. Gus is the local carpenter, he's going to make a box for him. I understand he'll be buried in boothill this afternoon."

Jim placed a double eagle on the counter. "See that he gets a decent burial," he said.

Outside he slacked his hard frame against one of the supports in front of the hotel and looked up and down the street. Pop Wilkins was just turning into his feed store. A couple of men were heading for the Chinese restaurant. He turned, tried Dave's office, but it was closed. There was no sign of life in the saloon across the street at this hour in the morning.

Jim headed for the red-and-white painted pole a few doors beyond. A small, brown man with thick black hair growing like a bush on his head was sweeping the walk. Jim said, "Are you open?" and Tony nodded.

"First customer every Friday I give a massage of the face—for free." He beamed. "You're the first, señor. I give you a good massage, no?"

"Yes," Jim grinned. He walked inside the small shop and sat down in the one chair and while Tony busied himself he took out the letter addressed to Bates and tore it open.

A ragged piece of wrapping paper was the only thing inside. A piece of paper similar to the one Matt had given him—a map. There was nothing else. No explanation.

Jim scowled at it. Tony was babbling about the lack of newcomers to Quito, the possibility of a railroad, the hot winds which periodically plagued the town. But Hatfield's thoughts were centered on the map in his hand. Why had Bates mailed himself a copy of the map? Or was this a copy? Was this really the original map Bates had drawn, and not trusting his fellow thieves, mailed it to himself as insurance against his death? It could be. In that case the man who had killed Bates had come away empty-handed. Or had found only a false copy meant to mislead his killer.

Something else occurred to Jim now, something that made him sit up abruptly. Tony, stepped back, clicked his scissors disapprovingly. "Diablo, señor! How can I cut the hair?"

Jim settled back. "Sorry, Tony."

But he was thinking of young Jeff Steele. Whoever had killed Bates probably knew by now that the Steele boy had taken Matt's map from him. If he had Cory's false map, and his own, then he would need only Jeff's map to find the money buried in the Soapstones.

It meant that Jeff Steele was in deadly danger— or already dead!

"Now for the massage, señor," Tony smiled, and slapped a hot towel on Jim's face.

DAVE BETTES came out of the saloon and walked across the street to his office. He had seen Jim leave the Mesa House and enter the barbershop and he walked slowly, ducking his head against the wind. It was not blowing so hard, but it was persistent and he knew this might last for several days.

Utah and Monte would be in a disagreeable mood when they showed up, and Dave sneered, thinking of this.

He was unlocking his door when he saw Vic Arness ride by, hat pulled low over his eyes. He turned and yelled to the man and the deputy turned and put his cayuse to the rack in front of the hotel. Dismounting, he stood a moment, scowling at Dave.

"I need a cup of coffee," he said roughly.

"Later," Dave snapped. "Come inside." Vic looked as though he needed more than a cup of coffee. He looked a little worn around the edges, like a man who had slept little, and there was a long nail scratch under his chin. Must be a regular wildcat, that nester woman, Dave thought. But his interest lagged; the hot tides of his youth had ebbed fast and he saw little pleasure in the other sex now.

Vic followed him inside the office. There was a sullen look in the gunman's eyes.

"I ain't awake yet," he protested.

"This will wake you!" Dave said. "The big feller's back in town. The one who broke out of my back room last night."

Vic stiffened. "I thought he'd be clear into Mexico by now."

"He's back in town." Dave's voice was taunting. "Shows how much he thinks of you, Vic. He's in Tony's right now, getting a shave and a haircut!"

Vic's eyes had an angry glint. "I don't see you making any moves," he growled.

"Listen, you fool!" Dave said harshly. "I pay you and the boys at the ranch to take care of things like this. You're the fast gun in town, Vic— the mean, tough deputy paid to wear a badge. It's your job!"

Vic waited, his mouth turning dry.

"He's come back," Dave went on, "to see how tough you really are. He came back last night and Big Mack had a run-in with him. He belted the hell out of Big Mack!"

Vic's eyes held stark amazement. "You're crazy!"

"Hah!" Dave walked around his desk and took a crooked cheroot from a tin box. "Ask Big Mack. If he can talk yet. He's up in your room, stretched out on your bed, with a busted nose and some cracked ribs."

Vic's hand went down in nervous gesture over his Colt butt. As though he wanted to wipe the sweat from his palm.

"What do you want, Dave?"

"I want this hombre dead," Dave said bluntly.

Vic licked his lips. "From what you say, he's no pushover."

"Reckon he ain't," Dave said. He was scowling as he lighted his cigar. "He might be Matt Singleton, Vic— then again, he might be one of them range detectives Bill Havens over at Crosshatch's been talking he'll send for."

Vic shook his head. "I don't like it," he said sullenly.

"You don't have to like it!" Dave said, then reading the sudden flare of anger in Vic's eyes he toned down. "You don't have to brave him cold," he suggested.

"Pull that old Tucson trick on him. I'll have a dozen witnesses who'll back you up in any inquiry. Don't forget," he went on swiftly, "I'm the law here in Quito. And you're my deputy." He saw hesitation flicker in Vic's gaze and he added thinly, "There's an extra five hundred dollars in it for you."

Greed made its swift mark on Vic's face. He nodded. "You'll back me?"

"I said I would," Dave rasped.

Vic licked his lips. "I'll be across the street. I need more than coffee for this job, Dave."

Bettes shrugged. "Don't take more than a bracer, Vic," he warned. He went to the door with the deputy and watched him cross the street and go into the saloon. Vic was a fast gun, and he was an old hand at the Tucson trick. He should not have too much trouble with the stranger who had come to Quito.

Ten minutes later Jim Hatfield came out of the barbershop. He felt clean and refreshed and in contrast Quito looked dirtier and meaner to him as he paused on the walk. The wind blew against his broad back, prying with gritty fingers at the back of his neck. He felt an edginess rise in him and he remembered Miriam's name for this irritating wind. *Sirocco.*

He could stand a good breakfast and a couple of cups of coffee, he thought— and with this in mind he crossed the street and turned south for Ah Ling's restaurant.

The bartender he had talked with last night came out and sloshed dirty water into the street and gave Jim a swift glance. But he ducked back inside before Jim could speak to him.

Hatfield grinned faintly. He walked past the saloon and glancing across the street he saw that Dave Bettes was in his office. He broke his stride, then thought better of it. He'd have his talk with Bettes after he had breakfast.

Behind him the saloon batwings creaked. Then he heard Vic Arness's voice. "Hold it up, fellow! I'm placing you under arrest!"

Jim turned slowly, sensing a nervous undercurrent in the deputy's tone.

Vic was on the walk in front of the batwings—he was facing Hatfield with a Colt cocked and levelled in his hand. His face was paler than usual.

"What for?" Jim asked.

"For breaking jail, manhandling a representative of the law, and for suspected stage robbery." Vic's voice was deliberately loud.

Hatfield studied the man. There was more than that behind Vic. There was murder in the deputy's eyes; the man was waiting only for the barest excuse. Out of his eye corners Jim saw Dave Bettes come to the doorway of his office, and now he knew why Vic Arness had braced him this way.

The Lone Wolf raised his hands shoulder high and grinned pleasantly. "You're the law," he said in mild agreement, and started to walk toward Vic.

The deputy's eyes glittered with momentary confusion. He took a quick step backward.

"No you don't!" he yelled. "Lift those guns out of the holsters, and drop them on the walk!"

ALERTNESS surged through Jim now. He saw through Vic's game; he was too old a hand at this grim business not to have run into the Tucson trick before. Once he dropped his hands to his guns to comply he was a dead man— and Vic Arness could claim, and have witnesses, that he had resisted arrest.

"Drop them!" Vic hissed.

"Go to hell!" Jim said flatly, and turned his back on the deputy. He took the long chance that it would confuse the killer— that Vic wouldn't dare shoot him in the back in plain sight of Quito's watching citizens. And knowing, too, that he would have to beat this man. For Vic was out to kill him, and if it wasn't one way it would be another.

He took a long stride away from the deputy, the skin between his shoulder blades puckering, and he caught the sound of Vic's inhaled breath. Hatfield whirled around then, his right hand blurring, gouting out into flame and smoke.

Vic's Colt was levelled and cocked, and yet he never fired a shot! He staggered under the tearing impact of Jim's lead; his right hand jerked upward and the Colt he was holding slipped out. It landed on the walk beside him and went off and the bullet gouged wood from the saloon wall.

Vic staggered around and fell against the batwings and sprawled forward on his face inside the saloon. The doors swung back and forth slowly, as if in creaky requiem.

Jim stood on the walk, a tall, cold-eyed man with a gun in his fist. He put his hard glance on Dave Bettes and the man stepped back inside the office and closed his door.

Slowly Jim ejected the two spent shells in his Colt and replaced them; he kept looking at the Justice of the Peace sign over Bettes's door, knowing that it was a mockery.

He'd let Dave squirm a while yet, he decided, and turned away from the saloon and the man he had just shot.

Ah Ling's place held a half dozen customers who had come crowding to the door at the sound of gunfire. They edged back inside as Jim came up, and squirmed nervously in their seats as the Ranger entered. One by one they had a quick breakfast and left.

Ling's moon face was agitated. He served Hatfield with unaccustomed speed, retiring after each serving to the beaded kitchen doorway to stare like some frightened barn owl at the Lone Wolf.

Jim finished a leisurely breakfast, built himself a cigarette and smoked most of it over his last cup of coffee. Then he paid for his breakfast and walked out. He came back to the saloon and noticed that Vic's body had been removed. Probably inside, he thought, and crossed the street to the Justice of the Peace office.

There was no one inside, but the door was not locked. Jim walked in and sat down at the desk and propped his feet on the boot-scarred top. He saw the cheroots in the tin box and took one and lighted up.

Dave Bettes walked in a few minutes later.

Jim said coolly, "Come in and sit down, Dave."

The evil-smelling man remained in the doorway, studying Jim. Finally he rasped, "You've got nerve, feller. Or maybe it's because you got damn few brains!"

"I've got both," Jim said without false modesty. He took his feet off the desk. "Close that door and sit down here! I want to have a talk with you."

Dave hesitated. Then he closed the door and came over and stood by the chair Jim had indicated. A grudging admiration peered out of his eyes. "Outguns my deputy, then walks in here and helps himself to my cigars. Maybe I'd better listen to you."

Jim grinned. "You've been after me to tell you why I came to Quito, Dave. Well, I'm going to tell you." He put his right palm down on the desk top with hard slap. "One hundred thousand dollars, Dave! That's what brought me to Quito!"

Bettes came around the chair. A narrow distrust showed in his eyes; he sank slowly down on the hard seat. "You're lying," he muttered.

"Think so? Listen," Jim said curtly. "Five men held up the Midnight Limited over in New Mexico ten years ago. They got away with one hundred thousand dollars—Wells Fargo money. Two of the five died before they got across the Soapstone badlands. The other three made it to Quito. They had buried the money in the badlands and made an agreement to meet here in Quito ten years later, when, they hoped, the robbery would pretty well be forgotten. Each man had a map, and each man's map was essential in finding that money again!"

Dave licked his lips, like a hyena approaching a carcass. His eyes were cold now and as wary as an old coyote's with one foot caught in a trap. "And you?"

"I said three of them got away!" the Lone Wolf snapped. "Oley Jones, Cory Bates and Matt Singleton!"

He waited, studying Dave's face now—and he felt disappointment touch him and

turn him cold. The man's eyes held a sudden greed, nothing more.

"Bates is dead!" Dave remembered. "You say you're Matt Singleton. Then where's this Jones hombre?"

Jim shook his head. He had played a long shot and had lost, and now he knew with bitter cynicism that he would have this man to contend with.

"I thought you might tell me," he said. "Oley was supposed to be here yesterday. But you say no strangers except Cory and myself showed up."

"There ain't been even a stray dog come to Quito to stay since Ball Hotchkiss and Dan Rourke arrived, four years ago. There're the Steeles, but they run a horse spread." He broke off, an ugly suspicin crowding into his eyes.

"Cory's dead!" Jim said flatly. "Someone killed him and took the map he was carrying on him. And the man who slugged me last night took mine. Unless—" he scowled at Dave—"unless you or Vic were lying?"

"We didn't take anything from you," Dave said harshly. "We didn't know you were carrying a map, or what it would have been for, anyway."

Jim pushed back in his chair. "Then Oley Jones has it," he decided. "Help me find Jones and I'll cut you in for a third of the money."

Bettes leaned forward, a thin sneer on his lips. He had figured this tall hombre as a range detective, but now he saw he was wrong. The man was someone he could understand, and deal with.

"Maybe you're Matt Singleton, and maybe you're not," he muttered. "But I still run this town. If you want my help you'll cut me in for half—or you'll have more trouble than you bargained for!"

Jim made a show of considering this. Then he nodded. "What are you going to tell the sheriff?"

"Who?"

"The sheriff. You said he'd be in Quito this morning."

"Hah!" Bettes's teeth showed like yellowed fangs in a humorless grin. "Sheriff Ventley ain't due in Quito. Made up that story last night to scare you. Figured you had something important to bring you to this fleabag town looking for Bates and Jones. We thought you'd talk if we pushed you hard enough!"

Jim got to his feet. "Reckon it was your idea, too, siccing Vic on me?"

Bettes shrugged. "Vic didn't need much pushing, feller. He was an arrogant man, Vic was—and he considered himself a fast hand with a gun. Almost as good as Ut—" He bit the name in two and grinned wider. "He just wasn't fast enough, was he?"

"Reckon he wasn't," Jim said coldly. He walked to the door, looked back. "Fifty-fifty," he said tonelessly. "But don't try any more tricks, Dave. I hate to be crossed."

Bettes walked to the dor after him. He waited until Hatfield was well down the street. "One hundred thousand dollars," he muttered. "You're a damn fool if you think I'll settle for less than all of it, feller!"

CHAPTER IX

Crossfire

MIRIAM STEELE shook her head to her father's warning. "I won't get into trouble, dad," she said firmly. "But I've got to know what happened. Jeff didn't get home last night. And Fantasy showed up early this morning with someone's saddle on her."

"Are you sure it's Jeff you're concerned about?" Brandon asked softly.

Her eyes held a startled awareness as she looked at him— she colored slightly. "Dad, he's a man who seems able to take care of himself. But he knew about Fantasy. And doesn't it strike you as strange that she should come back right after he returned to Quito?"

"I see the connection, if that's what you mean, Miriam," Brandon said drily. He put his hand on his daughter's shoulder. "I'll go. It's really no place for a girl."

"Mother needs you here," Miriam said.

"She'd be frightened if you left her."

"But you'll be here," he protested.

"Dad!" Her eyes held a dark hurt. "You know how it is between mother and me."

He let go of her, his face holding the knowledge and its bitter sadness. "Take care of yourself, Miriam," he said harshly and strode away.

She put her own saddle on Fantasy. She had thought of riding another horse, but the mare had muzzled her eagerly, whinnying her gladness to be back. And Miriam gave in to the trim strawberry roan.

She rode down from the bench where the wind blew clear, down onto the hot flats where the air was murky with dust. She swung down the road where Jim had come upon her yesterday—the remembrance brought color to her cheeks.

I acted like a fool, she thought. Then Fantasy snorted and jerked at the reins.

Two men rode out of the brush siding the road. They flanked her with abrupt hostility, hemming her in so she could not make a run for it. The lean, pock-faced man reached out and took Fantasy by the bit.

"Never figgered Big Mack the kind to give a woman a present, did you, Monte?" Utah's voice held a dry humor.

Monte was a humorless man. "Big Mack never gave anybody anything in his life," he muttered. "Except a beating."

Miriam jerked at her reins. "Let go of that bit! This horse belongs to me, not Big Mack!"

"So you say!" Utah murmured. "What brand, ma'am?"

Miriam said angrily, "She isn't branded. But Fantasy is my horse!"

"We'll tell Big Mack about it," Utah grinned. "Last time I saw this mare Big Mack was riding her. And he called her Queenie!"

The girl tried to beat at his arm. Monte rode alongside and lifted his hand and cuffed her alongside the head.

Utah said, "Now, Monte, a gentleman never hits a lady!" He let go the bit and slapped Miriam across the mouth. "Now let's not have any more talk from you, gal. Let's just ride on in to town."

BALL HOTCHKISS looked up as Jim came into the barn. He was sitting down on a wooden box in the harness enclosure, mending a bridle. The bridle slipped from his fingers and he cursed nervously.

Jim said, "I've got to see Jeff. It's important."

Ball turned a quick glance to him. "I haven't seen the kid since—"

"Last night," Jim interrupted coldly. "You rode out to him right after I left here with Miriam Steele."

Ball licked his lips. "All right. I've known the Steeles for three years, Ranger. Jeff's like my son. After he had his run-in with Mack he thought it best if he hid out for a spell. I brought him some grub last night."

"Jeff isn't only hiding out from Big Mack and you know it," Jim said. "He's after that hundred thousand dollars. He figures it belongs to him, because of his father's false imprisonment. You know that, don't you?"

Ball shrugged. "Sure, I know it. I always thought it was some sort of pipe dream, though. Never expected anything to come of it. Them holdup men caching that money out there and then coming back for it."

"It happened!" Jim said grimly. "I'm telling you this because the kid's in danger, Ball. I thought about the way things happend here last night and came up with an answer. Bates is dead. So is Matt Singleton. That leaves only Oley Jones. I thought Jeff might have killed Bates, but now I'm sure he didn't. He couldn't have known Bates was even in town until after Cory was killed. You told me yourself that Jeff had that fight with Big Mack and had slept most of the afternoon in the loft."

Ball nodded. "He was up there, Ranger."

"He had just gotten up when I rode in," Jim said. "So he couldn't have known

about Bates. And Bates was already dead."

Ball's eyes were expressionless.

"Jones would have known," Jim went on relentlessly.

"But you said Jones didn't show up!"

"He didn't show up yesterday," Jim agreed. "Because Jones was already in Quito. He had been for years, Ball. Waiting. He changed his name, and waited. Waited for the ten years to go by. Waited for Bates and Matt to show up. So he could kill them both. Because he never intended to split that money three ways."

"Who," Ball asked grimly, "is Jones?"

Jim shrugged. "Bettes, maybe. I'm not sure. It has to be Bettes. I thought I'd bring him out into the open by telling him why I had come to Quito. I let him think I was Matt Singleton, but if he's Jones he knows I'm not Matt. And if I'm right he's worrying about who I really am."

Ball wiped his brow with his neckerchief. "If he's Oley Jones he'll never let you get out of town alive, Ranger. And if he knows about Jeff—"

"If he isn't Oley Jones," Jim countered coldly, "then the real Oley Jones is in a sweat. Because Dave Bettes isn't the kind to let a hundred thousand dollars slip past his fingers!"

Ball stood up. "I'll take you to where Jeff is hiding out, Ranger." There were faint beads of sweat on his brow and upper lip. "But we'd better not leave town together. Not after what you just told Dave." He turned to the door and pointed to the southeast. "I'll leave first. Meet me by that small butte in about an hour."

Jim nodded. "In an hour, Ball."

He saddled Goldy and rode down the ramp and out onto the street. The wind was still blowing off the badlands. He wondered if the sand was blowing over the one hundred thousand dollars.

He turned Goldy in to the hotel rack and dismounted and went inside the Mesa House. He wanted to ask Kenny something—something he should have asked the desk clerk before.

When Hatfield came out his eyes held a steely glint. He knew now who Oley Jones was. . . .

The riders came up out of the south, looming through the swirling dust. Three of them, and the middle rider was Miriam Steele on Fantasy!

Jim stepped out to the edge of the plankwalk and the two men flanking the girl reined in abruptly at sight of this tall, hard-faced man with the thonged-down guns. Utah eyes held a narrowing regard; he was trying to place this big man. Monte kept a poker face.

Jim said, "Friends of yours, Miss Steele?"

Miriam's pale face was his answer. He could see the livid bruise on her face, and her puffed lips and he went cold with anger.

"Who in hell are you?" Utah drawled.

There was no longer reason for him to hide his identity, Jim thought. So he said bleakly, "The name's Jim Hatfield, Utah— Texas Ranger!"

Utah came driving up in his stirrups. He moved instantaneously, as though Jim's revelation was a prod, jerking him into blurring motion. He got his gun out and firing before he died—its blasting close to the ear of his mount sent it plunging away from the walk. He swayed in saddle, a dead man, and the horse was past Wilkins's feed store when he finally fell.

Monte was slower than Utah, he died with his Colt muzzle just clearing leather. He fell forward on his cayuse's neck and slid off, falling limply.

Miriam Steele was fighting Fantasy, holding her from bolting. Jim wiped a smear of blood from his cheek. Utah's first bullet had come that close; his second had scoured the skin across Jim's thigh.

"You were faster than I expected, Utah," he said bleakly, and turned to the girl.

Miriam's voice raised in desperate cry. "Jim! Look out, behind—" she saw that Jim would be too late, and she was already digging spurs into Fantasy's flanks.

The mare leaped ahead, crowding up onto the walk, and the gunblast sent it rearing upward, a thin screaming tearing from her throat. She fell backward, throwing the girl heavily.

Jim spun around. He had forgotten Dave Bettes, and bitter condemnation lashed him. He saw Bettes turn and run and he took after the man. Bettes ducked into the alley between his office and the next building and Jim followed. The outlaw boss made a ludicrous figure in his Prince Albert coat, running. He reached the end of the alley and brought up against a sagging board fence. It stopped him and he turned to face Jim like a cornered rat.

He fired swiftly at the big man coming for him and Jim's lead smashed into him. He buckled and fell forward and tried to crawl away. Jim came to stand over him and Bettes lifted his head, his eyes already sightless. "I didn't mean to cross you, didn't have chance to tell Utah not to—" He sagged into the dirt.

Jim left him. He ran back to the street where a crowd was gathering around Miriam and the roan mare. The animal was dying, Jim saw. Miriam was unconscious. Jim knelt beside her and saw to his relief that she was not badly hurt.

He turned to the nearest woman in the group. "Take care of her, ma'am. If she asks for me, tell her I've gone to get her brother."

The woman nodded. The men stared curiously, and with awe, as Jim walked swiftly to the big golden stallion still tethered to the hotel rack and mounted. The Lone Wolf took a last look at Miriam, who was sitting up now, then he put his thoughts on what lay ahead.

The wind was still blowing, hot and dry and insistent.

CHAPTER X

Ambush

BALL HOTCHKISS was waiting for him in the lee of the small butte when Jim rode up. A tumbleweed blew across Goldy's path, rolling toward its nameless destiny, the flats were shrouded in blowing dust. It would be a long, hot ride, Jim thought.

Ball was mounted on Sampson and Jim noticed that the saddlebags bulged, as though the man was prepared for a long journey.

The stableman was carrying a rifle in his saddle boot, and he was wearing an old holster and belt around his hips, cinched under his paunch. The walnut-handled Colt Miriam had lowered to Hatfield in Dave's back room jutted from that holster.

Ball caught Jim's look and said, "Bettes might have smelled out something, Ranger. I thought I'd pack this gun along, in case we ran into trouble."

"Dave Bettes is dead," Jim said. "So are Utah and Monte."

Hotchkiss twisted in saddle to look at him. "Dead?"

Jim nodded grimly. "I ran into them just before I left town." He explained what had happened. "They must have run into Miriam on the way in to Quito and brought her in."

He thought of Bettes's dying remark and it occurred to him that things seldom went the way men planned them. Dave had probably sent for Monte and Utah last night, and then, after his talk with Jim, had changed his mind.

Hotchkiss had neckreined his mule to stop. His face was pale.

"Did you find out if Dave Bettes was Oley Jones?"

Jim shook his head. "Dave died without saying." He made a wry gesture. "Reckon we'll never find the money now, but that doesn't matter so much."

Ball licked his lips. "Jeff'll be plumb disappointed. Since I've known the kid he's been counting on one of these days finding that money."

"He'll get over it," Jim said shortly, staring at Ball.

They rode west, a strange pair— a tall, wide-shouldered man on a powerful golden stallion and a short, paunchy figure

on a mule. They rode along the edge of the lava bed, and finally Ball turned into the narrow fissure leading in toward the ugly hills which aeons past had spewed forth this black and forbidding mass.

Ball grew quieter as they rode. He seemed to scrunch down in saddle, become small and thoughtful. The wind blew above them, crying softly.

About a mile inside that lava crack Ball suddenly drew aside. "The kid's real jumpy, Ranger," he said tensely. "It would be better if I rode ahead and set him straight about you first."

"We'll ride in on him together," Jim said grimly. "I'll take my chances with Jeff."

Ball shrugged.

They rounded a black overhang of rock and came into a small clearing. Ahead of them was the rising slant of a boulder-strewn hill, bare and ugly in the sun.

The remains of a campfire were visible in the clearing. Ball rode up to the embers and dismounted. He glanced down at the charred remains of the fire and then looked up at him. "Looks like he's gone," he said and stepped away from his mule, moving quickly for his age.

Jim slid sideways with the heavy report of a Colt from the burnt rocks to his right. He had barely caught a glimpse of a figure behind a glinting barrel, and even then he was not fast enough to beat the bullet.

The .45 caliber slug smashed into his shoulder and he fell heavily and rolled away from the mule who was lashing out wildly with both back legs. An iron will held back the wave of nausea that threatened to engulf him—he fought back the pain and the shock of the bullet.

He saw Ball Hotchkiss whirl and lift his Colt free and cut down at him and Hatfield shot him as he lay on his back. His bullet seemed to lift the small man upon his toes and the second broke him in two.

Jeff Steele broke from the rocks. He had his Colt in his hand, but Goldy was momentarily between him and Jim now. He came running, pistol cocked, looking for a clear shot at Jim. Hatfield rolled on his side and came to his knees and his right hand held him long enough so that his left cocked and fired the heavy Peacemaker he drew from his left holster.

His first slug smashed Jeff's Colt out of his hand as the kid came running; his second caught the gun while it was still spinning in the air and it seemed to disappear into the rocks.

Jeff skidded to a stop, his gun hand still tingling from the shock that had wrenched the Colt from it. Ball Hotchkiss was dragging himself away— it was a blind, unwilled movement. The instinct of a dying man to get away from what had hurt him.

Jim came to his feet. Blood was matting his shirt, his right arm hung limp at his side.

"Come here!" he ordered grimly. "Help me stop this bleeding. Get a bandage on this!"

Jeff hesitated. He felt sick. But Jim's voice lashed at him. "Come here!"

Jeff obeyed. He stood by as Hatfield holstered his Colt and put his left hand on Goldy to steady himself. Jim's face was pale, but his eyes held a grim glow. "Look in my belt, Jeff. Just back of the buckle, inside. You'll find a pocket stiched there. You'll find something else. *Get it out!*"

JEFF did as directed. There was something about this big man he didn't question, an authority he bowed to.

He found the badge and his eyes widened abruptly; he looked up into Jim's hard face.

"I'm a Texas Ranger," Jim said harshly. He nodded toward the dying man. "There's Oley Jones. The man who killed Cory Bates. The man who waited in Quito for Bates and Matt Singleton to show up, the man who wanted that hundred thousand dollars all for himself!"

Jeff shook his head. "Jones? That's Ball Hotchkiss, my father's friend!"

Jim sneered. "Jones was nobody's friend, Jeff. He didn't figure on you folks

coming to Quito— that was the first thing that went wrong for him. So he decided to play along with you. The second thing that went wrong was when I showed up in Matt's place. He knew I wasn't Matt Singleton, so he sent you around to Bates's room to kill me and take the map, if I carried one."

Jeff nodded, shamefaced. "I couldn't kill you. Not that way, and I didn't know Bates was dead. I found his body on the floor, I knew he'd been killed before I got there. Then I heard you at the door."

Jim shrugged. "I checked with the hotel clerk, kid, just before I came here with Ball. The only man who showed any interest in Cory Bates yesterday afternoon, was Ball Hotchkiss. He went into the Mesa House right after Bates left his room for the barbershop and checked the register. Kenny remembered that, when I questioned him."

Jeff ran his palm across his stubbled, sun-burned face. His eye was still slightly swollen and there was dried blood on the cut on his lip. "He came to see me last night," he said. "He told me about you. But he made me think you were passing yourself off as a Ranger just to get hold of that money. He figured to ride here with you today and I was to cut down on you from the rocks."

Jim shrugged. "Figured something like that. With me out of the way, he was set to travel, and you had the last section of map he needed." Jim made a weary gesture. "Search him, Jeff."

The youngster turned to the dead man. He found the two maps in a small inner pocket in Jones's coat. One was the one Jones had made out himself, the other, Jim reckoned, was the fake one he had taken from Cory Bates.

It didn't really matter, Jim thought, and he felt suddenly tired and strangely weak. He closed his hand around his saddle horn and his knees quivered and his lips felt numb. He said, "I think I'm going to need your help, Jeff." The boy came to him, his face mirroring his sharp concern.

He helped Jim into saddle of the big sorrel. Jim forced himself to sit straight while Jeff ducked back among the rocks and returned in saddle of his cayuse.

He looked back at the small, sprawled figure. "What about the money?" he asked.

"It'll keep," Jim said. "It's kept for ten years. A few more days won't matter."

The Lone Wolf recuperated at the Steele place. He had an attentive and attractive nurse. And no one mentioned the money still buried somewhere out in the badlands. It was as though it had suddenly become taboo.

When he was able to ride again he took Jeff and Brandon with him. They found the money with the help of the three maps drawn by the now dead men. They brought the money back to the Drag 7.

Jim kept the money in his saddle bags. "I'm taking it back and turning it over to its rightful owners, Wells Fargo." He was looking at Jeff and his mother. Lucy Steels said nothing, but she smiled faintly, and he saw no bitterness in that smile. Jeff grinned.

Brandon said, "I'm glad to see the last of it, Jim. It's a big weight off my mind."

"This money never belonged to you," Hatfield said. "But there's a ten thousand dollar reward that should be yours. I'll see that you get it, Brandon!"

He turned to the girl who stood by Goldy's side. "I hope you catch another horse like Fantasy, Miriam. And I hope all those dreams of yours come true."

There were tears in Miriam's eyes. unshed tears. This tall, broad shouldered man had been a dream, too, and all dreams end.

She nodded. "Take care of yourself, Jim. Drop by, sometime."

He raised his hand in brief goodbye and was gone. A tall man riding a golden stallion.

Down on the flats the sirocco was blowing again. But up on the bench it was clear and the air was good. Miriam stayed there, watching.

Two-gun Killer

a true story by
C. V. Jench

WILLIAM P. LONGLEY, born in Austin County, Texas, on May 6, 1851, was one of the few two-gun men of the old West who could shoot accurately with both weapons at one and the same time. Astride a horse running at full stretch, he could put twelve bullets in a six-inch circle at twenty-five paces. Afoot, he could shoot a cigar out of a man's mouth at an equal distance. He was equally expert at the lightning-draw. During his brief but colorful career he shot and killed close to forty other men. Twice he was caught and twice he was hanged, the last hanging proving final.

His skill with sixguns was acquired with constant practice. From age twelve he practiced daily. At age sixteen he killed his first man.

Actually, like so many other two-gun men of the times, he was compelled by existing conditions to depend upon his six-shooters for protection. The primary cause was the freeing of all slaves in the United States in 1865. The majority of the colored people welcomed their freedom happily and gratefully and became cheerful, hard-working, law-abiding people remaining on the best of terms with the whites. But with many of the younger colored men, this sudden freedom went to their heads, and they were further encouraged in their insolent, belligerent attitude towards white Southerners by Northern opportunists and carpet-baggers.

The first man shot and killed by Bill Longley was a Negro.

At the time Bill Longley's father, Campbell Longley, was farming near Evergreen, Lee County, Texas. The small settlement took its name from a grove of live oaks, one of which is still standing. And it was here, when Bill was barely sixteen, there came the inevitable first clash.

A burly young Negro who worked for them suddenly lost his temper and started calling Bill's father every vile name he could lay tongue to. The colored man was wearing a gun, but Bill and his father were unarmed. Bill started at a run towards the house for his guns. The Negro fired

several shots after him but his shooting was wild. When Bill reappeared he was wearing his two sixguns. As he determinedly approached, the colored man again started shooting, and again missed. When within range Bill drew his weapons and the Negro went down, riddled with lead.

From then on, human life seemed to mean nothing to Bill Longley; he killed and killed without compunction.

As Northern troops were then prosecuting and even hanging white Southerners who killed colored men—even in self defence—Bill Longley deemed it advisable to clear out of the district for a time, so rode to Lexington and joined forces with Johnson McKowen, a notorious gunman who had many notches on his guns. Came the night when some of the colored people in and around Lexington staged a united attack against all whites. Most of the whites fled or remained barricaded in their houses. Refusing to be intimidated, Longley and McKowen rode openly through the rioting crowd. When shots were fired at them they rode at full gallop into the mob, their guns flaming. Longley's guns killed four of the rioters and wounded many more.

It was then that Bill Longley became a marked man, the authorities circulating his description as: Height: six feet. Weight: 150 lbs. Black hair, eyes and mustache. Lean, muscular and slightly stooped-shouldered. Most outstanding feature the penetrating keenness of his eyes. Adding: This man is a dead shot and lightning-fast on the draw. Considered dangerous.

Longley and McKowen then returned to Evergreen, arriving on the night a small circus was playing there. Tanking up at a saloon they then rode to the circus, charged right into the tent on their horses and commenced shooting at the feet of the two clowns, forcing them to do the hoe down, the back step, the Irish jig and other dances. They then raced around the small ring doing various feats of horsemanship, then left.

Oddly enough the crowd approved, and Bill Longley gained many admirers and supporters that night.

Longley and McKowen then parted company and Longley went to Karnes County, where he took a job with a rancher named John Reagan. Tiring of this he again hit the trail. Passing through Yorkton he was mistaken by a company of soldiers for Charles Taylor, a killer they were hunting. Vastly outnumbered, Longley immediately clapped spurs to his horse. The soldiers followed and a running gun-battle ensued. Sergeant Hipwell rode the only horse that could keep up with Longley's mount. He kept shooting at Longley—and missing. Suddenly drawing in his horse, Longley turned and fired one shot at Hipwell. The bullet crashed into Sergeant Hipwell's brain and he toppled from the saddle, dead. The other soldiers then abandoned the chase.

REALIZING that every soldier in the county would now be hunting for him, Longley headed for Arkansas. Here he fell in with a young outlaw named Thomas Johnson and went home with him to spend the night, not knowing that Johnson was also a much-sought horse thief.

That night Johnson's house was quietly surrounded by a posse. Warily, noiselessly, several of the vigilants entered the building. They surprised Longley and Johnson sleeping off the effects of too much liquor the night before, and captured them without a shot being fired.

Dragged to the nearest tree, Longley and Johnson were hanged from the same limb. As they dangled, kicking and gasping agonizingly, members of the posse, as they turned to ride away, fired a few shots at them. One of the bullets struck Longley's belt buckle and glanced off. Another bullet, by some strange freak of fate, struck the rope just above Longley's head. Slowly, strand by strand, the hemp unravelled and Longley fell unconscious to the ground.

A 12-year-old brother of Johnson's had followed the posse, pleading with the vigilants to spare his brother, but they had ignored his sobbed pleas. Now the boy

ran forward and hurriedly tore the noose from about Longley's neck Presently Longley recovered consciousness and at once cut down Johnson, but Johnson was dead.

News of this happening spread far and wide, causing Longley to be contacted by a desperado named Cullen Montgomery Baker, who persuaded him to join his notorious Baker gang. One odd quirk of Baker's was that he never robbed Southerners, concentrating chiefly on Northern government trains and in protecting true Southerners from Northerners and the small percentage of colored men who had allowed their new freedom to go to their heads.

In the spring of 1868, the Baker gang neatly turned the tables on a pursuing posse by ambushing them and disarming them. Among the captives Longley recognized the man who had put the noose about his neck when they hanged him. He asked that the captive vigilant be turned over to him. His request being granted, he tied the terrorized prisoner hand and foot, dragged him over to a tree and, watched by the others, single-handedly hanged him.

By now there was a one thousand dollar reward—a lot of money in those days—on Baker's head, and five hundred dollars on Longley's. Yet, despite this and the strenuous efforts of soldiers and vigilants, Baker and Longley continued to elude capture, although Longley shot and killed seven more men in so doing.

That summer Longley quit the Baker gang and set out for his home at Evergreen. He and a brother-in-law, John Wilson, then went scouting, it being claimed that on this expedition they killed four men who tangled with them.

Alone, Longley then started for Salt Lake City to visit another brother-in-law. On the way he joined a cattle driver, Martin Rector, who was driving a herd to Kansas. Rector was inclined to be domineering, over-bearing and truculent. One day came the inevitable showdown. A duel was arranged. Back to back, each had to walk ten paces, wheel and fire. Longley heard Rector stop and turn at six paces. Cat-like, he also stopped and wheeled, putting six bullets into Martin Rector before he could press trigger.

Leaving the herd, together with a cowboy named Fred Davis, Longley again headed for Utah. Reaching Leavenworth, Kansas, they went into a saloon. A drunken soldier, hearing that Longley was from Texas, jeered that all Texans were horse and cattle thieves and their women without virtue. Longley's guns literally leaped into his hands. The soldier died.

Longley got away but was arrested at St. Joseph, Missouri, taken back to Leavenworth and placed under close guard awaiting trial. Two weeks later he escaped by knocking out the guard who was escorting him to the lavatory, and headed for the Pacific Slope by the northern route.

ARRIVING at Cheyenne, Wyoming, he joined a party of miners heading for the Big Horn Mountains. They encountered such severe weather three of the party were frozen to death and Longley and the other survivors returned more dead than alive.

Next—although he was a wanted man with a price on his head—Longley got a job at a government corral. The quartermaster, Jock Gregory, in charge, was a grafter, and instructed Longley in ways and means of making extra money, telling him they would split fifty-fifty. Came the day when Longley sold a span of government mules to a party of miners for five hundred dollars, but he told Gregory he received only three hundred and gave the quartermaster one hundred and fifty as his share.

Gregory was not satisfied and did a little sleuthing. Learning that Longley had cheated him out of one hundred dollars he confronted Longley with a loaded shotgun and demanded the money. Such was Longley's speed and skill with sixguns his weapons flashed into his hands and before he could even press trigger, Gregory died in a blast of hot lead.

Longley immediately fled but, followed by soldiers, he was captured on the third

day when he ran out of ammunition.

Brought to trial he was sentenced to thirty years in the Iowa State Penitentiary. Whilst being escorted to the prison, with one hundred dollars in gold he had secreted on his person, he bribed his two-man escort into allowing him to escape.

For a year after that he lived with the Ute Indian tribe, then started on a circuitous route to Texas. In Morris County, Kansas, at a small town called Parkersville, he got into a poker game with a gambler named Charles Stuart. A quarrel ensued, guns flashed and Stuart died with a bullet through his head. At that Charles Stuart's father, a wealthy saloon owner, offered a reward of fifteen hundred dollars for the capture of the man who had killed his son. Longley was told of this by two men—Bruce Peters and John Gibbons—whom he encountered as he rode away. The three cooked up a scheme.

Longley allowed Peters and Gibbons to take him prisoner, return him to Parkersville and deliver him to Sheriff Chart Reid. Stuart's father thanked Peters and Gibbons, paid them the fifteen hundred dollars and they rode away.

The next day they returned, saying they would like to bid Longley good-bye. Sheriff Reid took them to Longley's cell. Gibbons and Peters then overpowered, gagged and bound Sheriff Reid, released Longley and gave him five hundred dollars, his share of the reward.

Longley next returned to his father's farm. He had been there but a few days when he was warned that a posse was on the way to capture him. Mounting his horse, Longley headed for Comanche country.

For weeks after that he was on the run, for now law-abiding citizens were united in trying to rid the country of all killers and outlaws. Came the night when Longley camped alone on the High Divide. He awoke the next morning to find himself surrounded by more than twenty determined and armed men, headed by Sheriff Jake Finley. Guns in hand, Longley scrambled to his feet, telling them he would die there and then, and some of them would die with him, before he would surrender. Why die when likely only a prison sentence awaited him, Sheriff Finley argued astutely. And hadn't Longley proven he could escape from jails? At that Longley surrendered.

Sheriff Finley took his prisoner to Austin. There, Governor E. J. Davis told Finley that as he was an appointed law-enforcement officer he could not collect the reward on Longley's head. Disgruntled, Sheriff Finley then accepted a bribe of five hundred dollars, offered by William Peterson, a relative of Longley's, to allow Longley to escape, and again Longley returned to his father's farm.

But he was now a much-hunted man, could never hope to settle long in one place and live a normal life. A few days later he again hit the trail, obtaining work here and there under various aliases, eventually reaching the ranch of a Captain Sedbury.

THREE weeks later, on a Saturday night, while playing poker with a man named George Thomas in a back room of the local general store, Longley accused Thomas of cheating. Thomas hotly denied the accusation and reached for his gun, but could not match Longley for speed and went down before bullets poured from Longley's six-shooters.

Although Longley was never known to commit an outright robbery his name as a ruthless killer had spread far and wide and the hunt to apprehend him intensified. Just the same, by using various names, he continued to elude sheriffs and posses and in June, 1876, arrived at Delta County, Texas. Here, under the name of William Black, he became infatuated with Sarah Lay, the daughter of Reverend Roland Lay, and started working on his farm. Somehow Reverend Lay learned that William Black was really the notorious Bill Longley and notified the local sheriff. Longley was trapped and put in jail. Two days later he started a fire in the local jail and escaped during the uproar and confusion. Securing his horse and six-shooters he rode straight to the home of

Reverend Lay. He found Roland Lay in the barn milking a cow. Drawing his guns Longley shot and killed him.

This cold-blooded murdering of a much-respected, God-fearing, unarmed and defenseless man incensed the whole countryside, and posses were raised everywhere. Riding hard and fast, Longley reached DeSoto Parish, Louisiana, in May, 1877. Confident that he had shaken off all pursuit he rented a small shack and for a time lived chiefly by hunting. He further started paying attention to attractive Lavinia Jacks, the daughter of Sheriff Asa Jacks.

One of Longley's weaknesses was that if he stayed long at a place and became friendly, he would eventually divulge his real name. He now told Lavinia Jacks that he could not ask her to marry him under false pretenses, and that his rightful name was Bill Longley. Although horrified—for Longley had a bad reputation where women were concerned, having betrayed several—Lavinia Jacks concealed her feelings and asked Longley to come back the next evening for his answer.

Longley did so. Opening the door slightly, Lavinia Jacks told him she would not give him her answer while he was wearing his sixguns. Smilingly, Longley then unbuckled his gun belts and dropped them to the floor of the verandah. Lavinia then opened the door and invited him inside—where Longley found himself confronted by Sheriff Jacks with drawn gun, and two determined deputies aiming loaded shotguns.

It was either surrender or be blown to pieces.

Longley surrendered.

On the morning of September 3, 1877, even now but twenty-six years of age, Bill Longley was arraigned for trial at Giddings before Judge E. B. Turner. Convicted, he was sentenced to be hanged on October 11th. In splendid health, Longley remained cheerful in jail boasting that either he would escape or be rescued by friends. But the authorities were taking no chances. Guards were trebled. The few who visited Longley in jail had to strip for searching and then don a shirt and overalls loaned to them, before talking to him. None were allowed to come within reaching distance of him.

At 2 p.m. on October 11th, the grim procession started for the gallows. Longley rode in a buckboard with Sheriff James Brown, two deputies, and Fathers Spillard and Querat. In front, behind and on either side rode fifty fully-armed cavalrymen.

Longley mounted the gallows steps almost jauntily, and waved to the crowd of several thousand who surrounded the structure, for people had come from far and near to witness his execution.

Swiftly Longley's arms and ankles were tied and the black hood drawn over his head. The noose was then adjusted and the lever pulled. There was twelve feet of space beneath the trap but the rope had not first been stretched. Also, it now slipped on the beam to such an extent Longley's feet struck the ground when he fell.

Working fast, Sheriff Brown and his deputies hauled on the rope and made it secure to the beam. Longley swung clear. But his neck was not broken and for long minutes he groaned and kicked, dying slowly and gaspingly. Presently he was declared dead, his two-gun career ended.

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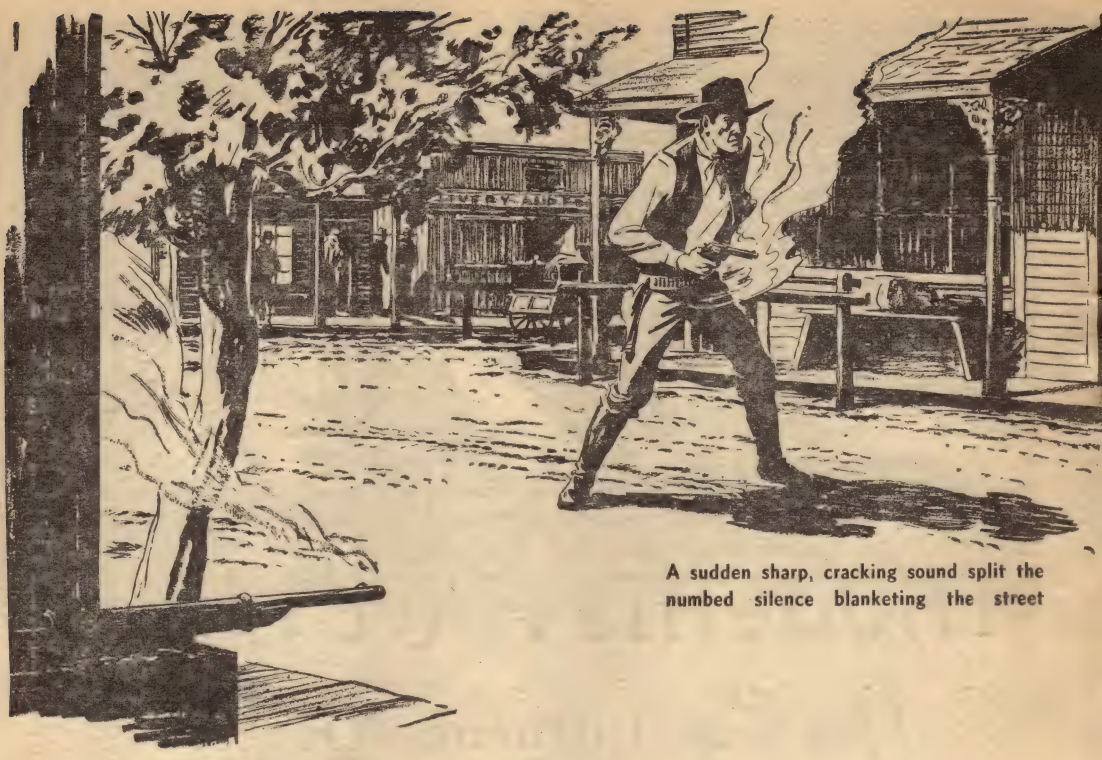


A sudden sharp, cracking sound split the numbed silence blanketing the street

A WAY OF DYING

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Were the things he had found in this town worth fighting and dying for?

THE trail herd was bedded down for the night. Clay Ballou, eight hundred miles of weary distance behind him, got up from the campfire and looked out over the swollen river that was delaying the progress of over six thousand head of cattle by at least five days. Wyoming still lay a thousand miles to the north. He built a cigarette, then walked toward the chuck wagon where the trail boss was checking supplies.

"I'm taking a ride, Alroyd," he said. "This herd is content to stay quiet, and I guess you can spare me for a couple of days."

"Where do you figure to ride, Clay?" Alroy snapped. "The next trail town is eleven miles ahead if you care to swim this river. Or are you going back to that fly-ridden crossroads place where we paid a dollar a throw for diluted whisky?"

"I'm riding back to Ledsburg," Ballou said quietly.

The trail boss looked at the puncher as if he doubted what he had heard. "You jughead," he said. "That town is twenty to thirty miles back. We had our fun there, Clay, maybe too much, and they are not remembering us too kindly. Did you leave something behind?"

"I am not certain," Ballou said. "But I have to find out, Alroyd. I have fifty head of stock here carrying my own brand and if I am not back in three days consider them sold. A bank draft will reach me at Ledsburg, General Delivery."

Carl Ballou strode toward the rope corral, a man part way between twenty-five and thirty with a square weather-darkened face. Passing through the amber glow from a dying campfire near the river bank his widely spaced blue-gray eyes revealed an intense concentration—as if puzzled over this move he was making.

He saddled a black horse he had been partial to during the long ride from Corpus Christi and was soon riding back toward Texas. He rode for several hours, then slept, and entered Ledsburg's single wide stret late the next afternoon. The tie-rails in front of the drab frame buildings were practically empty and there was a sleepiness in the town. But Clay was certain that within a few hours the place would come fully alive and throw its racket out over the flats.

Passing the restaurant he slowed his horse, but the girl he had looked at closely that wild night and who had looked back at him with more than little interest was not there. He got out of the saddle at Elwell's stable and led the black inside.

A grulla bronc the hostler was currycombing suddenly snorted and wheeled around, lifting its front feet high. Ballou pitched to the side and came up against a stall, his right hand still gripping the black's straps, coming in contact with an exposed nail. He felt a stab of pain, and was sucking the blood from the wound when the hostler quieted the grulla down.

He was an old man. Ballou guessed him to be eighty or more. His stubbled face

was lined and shrunken, his smile was nearly toothless.

"That's the way it goes, friend," he said, and grinned. "The big things you can mostly take care of but some little thing of no consequence will trip you up." He led the grulla into a stall and made it fast, then took charge of Ballou's black. "I'll get you some liniment for that hand, friend," he said in his small piping voice. He laughed again. "Reminds me of my Pa. Buffalo hunter he was. He went out one day and never came back. We went after him and found him near one of the biggest buffaloes you ever did see. He'd got it, but a little old rattler, it seems, got him. Some old rattler sitting in the sun, wanting to be left alone, and he must have stepped on him when he got a bead on that buffalo."

"Feed the horse," Ballou said, and caught the strong smell of whisky on the old man's breath.

He crossed the street and laid his broad shoulders against the side of a weather-gray building, and watched the people go by, irritated at himself. Why had he come back to Ledsburg? What was there in and about this town that had stirred up a bad and bitter memory? He looked across the street. The old man was sitting on a box in front of the stable, arms locked over his chest, and one leg slowly swinging. He caught himself wondering what the bony framework with the stubble of beard and faded eyes had been when he was young. He was nothing now, perhaps he had been nothing then. It reminded him of his own aimlessness and brought a deep sigh from his throat.

A man walked past, turned, and came back to squint at him. He was about Ballou's age and he wore a star. He was a loose-limbed man with a pair of eyes too mild for one sworn to uphold the law.

Ballou grinned and said, "Sheriff, we paid for the glassware we busted in the Two Dance."

"If you've come back for trouble, puncher," the sheriff said, "you'll easy find it. Better go back to that trail herd."

"It'll keep," Ballou said, and wondered at the jumpiness he saw in the lawman's eyes. And now he recalled the man's name. Beckridge.

Beckridge's eyes dropped to the hang of the puncher's gun, then lifted again. "Gunmen," he said quietly, "are no novelty in this town. Don't crowd your luck, friend."

He continued on his cruise and Clay Ballou's mouth curled up at the corners. He remembered a long time ago in another town when a kid of fourteen had vowed to high Heaven he would never touch a gun. That was just after he had seen his first man killed and not long after his father had been shot down in front of the shop where he printed his newspaper, the Sage City Sentinel. Sage City was three hundred miles from here so why was the old and ugly picture clear in Clay Ballou's mind again?

SAM BALLOU had been a good newspaper man, but the courage of his convictions had cost him his life. He had launched an attack against crooked gamblers and crooked politicians that had turned his town into a paradise for the wild bunch. He had threatened to expose certain men he had found out were hiding behind names not their own. Three men had ridden by his shop one night when he was working late and had turned their guns loose on him.

The day following, Clay Ballou had stood by a grave and quickly got all his crying done. One of his father's friends told him later that it must have been the three men who had gotten into a fight in the Last Mile on the afternoon of the killing. One of them had lost part of a tooth in the free-for-all. These men had been strangers to the town, and no doubt had been hired to kill Sam Ballou.

Ballou kept remembering. Old Doc Rowley had said it was a big piece of an eye-tooth they had found on the floor. Rowley and all the others who had seen the three men had refusd to give a fourteen year old boy their descriptions.

"You'll go get a gun when you think you're man enough, Clay," Rowley had

said. "You'll spend your life hunting and getting a reputation that will put you in an early grave. We'll find them and hang them, don't worry about that, son."

Clay Ballou had lost no time in getting himself a sixgun and by the time he was nineteen he was satisfied he could draw as fast as any man alive. During those five years after his father's death the law began to get teeth in it and the crooked element had deemed it prudent to move elsewhere. Still two years from being a man, Clay Ballou had saddled up and began the long search.

He had been on a dozen far-flung cattle spreads since then, and in a hundred towns, and then one day up in South Dakota his fever of search had cooled. Time wears a bitter loss or a memory threadbare, and soon a man chooses to forget.

A girl walked past and he glanced at her, casually at first. And then he came out of his slouch when she slowed her step and looked his way. She was a fair girl, a touch of gravity in her soft features. Her cheeks flushed for a moment and then she turned her eyes away from him with a toss of her head and hurried along the walk, to finally turn into the restaurant.

Ballou smiled. She had remembered him, he thought, out of all that bunch that had howled around the town that night. The feeling was good. A man who hated delay and obeyed impulses, he moved down the street to the eating place and stepped inside.

A bald man was removing his apron, and almost immediately the girl came out of a back room, tying a frilly apron around the waist of a freshly starched dress.

"I'll take over, Arch," she said to the bald man, and gave Ballou a swift appraisal. "Sit down if you want to eat," she told him. "The menu is on the wall."

"Sure," Ballou said. "I only want a bearpaw and some coffee for now," and he became conscious of a hunger stirring deep inside him, one that a full stomach could never satisfy. Was this girl the only reason for his return to Ledsburg?

She brought him the food and said, "I saw you tearing up the town the other night. You were all very lucky to get out of here alive. It is a bad town."

He drained his cup and looked up at her, and was aware that her eyes held a glint of speculation, and a kind of wistfulness.

"Seems peaceful enough," Ballou said. "It can't ever be real wicked as long as you're in it." His last few words were lost in the clatter of hoofs that boiled up dust out in the street. It came in through the window screens.

The girl said, "The Anchor crew. Your good luck they weren't in town that night."

"A real salty bunch?" Ballou inquired, and looked up at her, grinning. He wondered if she was not the real reason, the only reason for his coming back.

"Studer hires no other kind," the girl said simply, her voice kept low. "I wish you hadn't come back."

"Who's Studer?"

"He runs Anchor. It covers half the valley and spills out onto the desert. It keeps spreading like a plague and smaller men move on or are killed. Beckridge's life isn't worth the bent spoon you're stirring your coffee with and his wife lives in terror. She has a five year old son."

"Would you mind telling me your name?" Ballou asked. "And why do you work here in Ledsburg?"

"Helen," she said. "Helen Tenbrook. I own this place."

"Clay Ballou," he said impulsively, and inwardly questioned his intelligence. "The name, please remember, is for you alone."

Reading his thoughts, she smiled and shook her head. "I have no one. I am alone here."

"I've been alone myself for many years, Helen. It's not good." He got up and she took his hat from the back of a chair and handed it to him. He looked straight into her eyes and said, "I'll see you soon again."

Out on the walk he immediately be-

came aware of the change that had come over the street. Anchor's arrival had apparently been the signal for the townspeople to move aside and give them elbow room. Their loud and bawdy talk and coarse laughter spilled out through the smoky doorway of the Two Dance. There was the sound of a shot and a tinkling of breaking glass. The riotous racket increased in tempo as Ballou headed for the far end of the street, wondering if hunches were only superstitions after all. He turned into the hotel and bought himself a room, signing the name, Mayo Slade, on the register.

The clerk's voice was cold, and impersonal. "There is a condition here, Slade. Sometimes a couple of the Anchor riders decide to stop over. You just bought the last room. You might have to move out. Money refunded of course."

Ballou's temper quickened but he kept control and snappd, "We'll see," and pockted the key hitched to the wooden tag.

He left the hotel and angled across the street, his better sense telling him to leave Ledsburg. Passing the stable he saw the old hostler still sitting on the box and there was an expression in his old eyes that hungrily asked for only a casual word or the slightest sign of recognition.

Ballou said, "A hot night," and the old man agreed that it was and grinned happily.

FOUR riders came in and swung toward the Two Dance, pulled up and considered the brands on the broncs standing hipshot in front, then swung away and rode toward a smaller bar up the street. Anchor it seemed, owned the town body and soul. A farm wagon drew abreast of the Two Dance, and a tall gaunt man jumped off while it moved.

He yelled back at the youngster holding the reins, "Take 'em to the blacksmith's, son. Get 'em shod."

"Pa," the kid called back. "Don't go in the T—"

Clay Ballou watched the heavy-boned shacker stride toward the saloon, and could see the fire burning in the dark wells of his eyes.

"Wait!" Clay yelled, but the man paid him no heed.

Talk and laughter broke off when the man shoved his way through the batwings. Ballou heard the farmer ask loudly and angrily for Jim Studer.

"He's not here, sodbuster!" a flat and wicked voice said. "I'm Vird Logan and you can talk to me. You've got a half a minute to have your say, you dirty slow-elker. Then we'll throw you out."

"Studer can't drive me off that land! He had those hides planted under my ice-house. Beckridge knows it. Anchor ain't the law here, Logan!"

"Look out, Vird!" a man yelled, and then there was a blast of a sixgun.

Clay Ballou came into the Sun Dance on the run. The nester was on his knees staring unbelievingly toward the doorway, his sun-bleached gray eyes losing their luster, and then he pitched forward on his face, his battered hat rolling away. Ballou saw that a blackened corn cob pipe was clutched in his right hand.

"You saw him draw! Least it looked like he did, Vird," a hard and raspy voice said. "How could I know he was going for his pipe?"

"Sure, Paley," a heavy-chested man said. "We saw him."

Ballou felt a cold breath of air strike against his chest, and his throat suddenly went bone dry. Paley! He swung his eyes toward the short, wiry man leaning against the bar who was slowly holstering his gun. He had a small head and a pair of ears plastered flat against it. His nose was long and narrow with flared nostrils, and a stub of a cigarette hung loosely from his thick lips. Ballou got the full force of the gunman's flat and deadly eyes.

Paley asked, "Who are you?"

"A cowpuncher not looking for any trouble," Ballou said, and became conscious of an unreasonable hatred for this Roy Paley, a man he had never set eyes on before.

An Anchor puncher said, "Here comes

Beckridge," and dropped an insolent laugh.

Ballou moved toward the back of the big smoke-filled room, turned, and looked at the sheriff. Beckridge knelt down beside the dead farmer, turned him over on his back. He looked up, his eyes playing between Vird Logan and Paley. "He had no gun," he said as he got to his feet. "Paley, I always heard you gave a man his chance, no matter what other rotten things they said about you. This is murder."

"I don't intend to stand trial, Sheriff!" the gunman said, his lips curled with scorn. "My main reason for coming to Ledsburg tonight was to give you a message from Studer. You are to turn over your star before Friday night, Beckridge. You're through throwing a bluff and bucking Anchor. If you ain't on the stage out of town at seven o'clock Friday night, your family will be burying you on Saturday morning.

"How far does Studer think he can go?" the sheriff yelled, throwing his glance toward Vird Logan. Ballou was aware of the strain that had been riding the man. There was more frustration than fear in Beckridge's eyes. There was a stubbornness around his mouth that said he would never run away. "Does he hold the life of every person in this valley in his dirty hands?"

"Go ask him, Beckridge," Paley said. "And tell the shackers to carry their pipes in the bibs of their overalls from now on."

Beckridge left the Two Dance, mocking laughter at his back. Two men picked the shacker up and carried him out. From the walk one shouted, "Where's his wagon?"

Ballou dropped into a chair, the numbness of shock just beginning to run out of him, and kept his eyes on Roy Paley, a man considered the fastest gun of the time. Logan said something to Paley that made the gunman laugh and lay bare a gold tooth that glittered in the light from the big lamp swinging overhead. A deep inner excitement shook Ballou's hands and he stretched them out on the table and clasped them tight. He considered the thing called coincidence that men scarcely believed, yet what had drawn him back to Ledsburg?

Paley called those around him to the bar and yelled for whisky. Ballou could not pull his eyes away from him. Studer had hired the gunman to kill Beckridge. Other men in other places, like Sage City, could also have hired him to commit murders they lacked the nerve to do themselves. And the time element fitted, for Paley was pushing forty, and hard.

Clay's heart pounded against the racket that was again building up in the Two Dance. He had never dreamed he would ever confront more than an average hand in the use of a sixgun, and there was a sensation in him laced with both fear and a blood-quickening conjecture. He had never stood up to a man with a Colt; his targets had been tin cans and knotholes in the trees. Men who knew had told him that a living target, for the first time, was dangerously disconcerting.

Ballou, his nerves singing, got up and walked to the door, expecting any one of the Anchor crew to drop a remark that would pull him into bad trouble, but apparently sobered by the recent needless killing, they left him alone. The street lamps had turned the yellow dust to silver and Ledsburg had become fully alive. Sam Ballou, his son reasoned now, had been a fighting man with a typewriter and a printing press and had been willing to die for a principal. He would expect nothing less from his son. Clay Ballou told himself he must not forget that fact again.

HE WENT down the street to the restaurant and nearly collided with a dark-eyed woman coming out. Apologizing, he noticed she was very frightened. Six men were eating at a round table in the corner and he dropped into a chair at a discreet distance. Helen Tenbrook came over and gave him a quick smile, then suddenly sobered.

"I have reason to believe that was Mrs. Beckridge I met outside," Clay said.

The girl nodded and drew her lips tight together. "She saw them carrying the nester to the undertaker's, and in her eyes it was her husband, Frank. She has been pleading with him to leave and forget his pride. The town isn't fit to die for, Clay. Is there a man living who can shoot Paley down?"

"Men have to try," Ballou said.

Helen Tenbrook caught the flatness in his voice and the way he turned his eyes away from her when he spoke.

"You, too," she suddenly said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. "I had hoped you had come back for a different reason, Clay. A lonely woman can be a fool."

"There are things a man has to do, Helen," Ballou said.

She walked away from him and soon the kitchen door banged shut. Ballou took a deep breath and left the restaurant.

He idled up the street and crossed to the dark-windowed Cattlemen's Bank, and from there he watched the traffic entering and leaving the Two Dance. He saw the Anchor crew pile out, their talk loud and profane, sounding all through the town. Roy Paley came out last, an insolence in his swagger and his eyes sweeping the walks as if looking for the slightest objection to Anchor's behavior. He heard the thud of boots near him and turned to see Frank Beckridge and a youngster of five or less hanging close to him.

A little piping voice pleaded, "Just a little rubber ball, pa. Five cents at Liederman's."

The sheriff peered at Ballou. "You're still around," he said crisply. "Take some friendly advice and quit this town."

"Your boy, Sheriff?" Ballou asked, and reached into his pocket.

Beckridge said dismally, "It is. I suppose you'll hang around to see the fun, Mister?"

"Maybe," Ballou said, and spun a coin toward the boy who readily plucked it out of the air. "Get the ball, son," he said. "And a bat to go with it."

The boy said joyfully, "Thanks, Mister!"

The sheriff seemed about to protest. Finally he said, "Come on, Danny!" and hurried along the walk.

Ballou's hatred for Paley reached into him deep. The man owned the town he happened to stop in for an hour, a day, or a week, and killed without risk of punishment. Ballou told himself the man was an abomination and had to be destroyed. He stood there building up a bitterness that had worn thin, a stronger emotion he would not have admitted to making the task difficult, an insatiable curiosity. Helen Tenbrook had said Paley was indestructible, and Ballou, of all men, wanted to appear ten feet tall in her eyes.

The stage rumbled in, the driver holding the gigs high and shouting to those he knew along the street. Three passengers left the Concord in front of the hotel. One looked like a gambler but could easily have been anything else. There was a tall and thin man dressed in blue serge store clothes who could well be carrying a puncher's outfit in his warsack. A fat woman hurried along the walk to an awaiting buckboard and a man got off the rig, kissed her lightly on the cheek and helped her to the seat. Clay Ballou looked for the thin man again but he was nowhere in sight. It was a warm night but a chill ran along his bones.

He moved out of the shadows and into the light and saw Helen Tenbrook leaving the restaurant, and he angled across the street and met her in front of the gunsmith's.

"I'd be pleased if you'd let me walk you home," he said.

"All right, Clay."

He was sure he noticed a kind of pain in her eyes, and despite her reserve he was strongly aware of an emotion, closely held, between them. Now he knew how Beckridge must feel because he had something precious to protect.

He said as they walked along, "A man can't stand aside and let Paley shoot Beckridge down. He has a wife and child, Helen. I have neither."

"Men think of their pride before anything else!" she said angrily. "I am not certain of your concern for people almost strangers to you. It is the exhibitionist in most men. They are willing to die, it seems, if for only a few moments they can be a hero in the eyes of other men. You shoot a mad dog down, but you give a madman a gun and more than an even chance."

"Any other way would be murder," Ballou said wearily. "Are you interested in my staying alive, Helen?"

"If I said I was would you still carry this thing through?"

He nodded. "But it would mean my chances against Paley would not be as slim."

She stopped and turned to face him, her eyes getting afraid as she looked into his. "Please leave me now, Clay. You haven't the right to play on the heart of any woman. Let me go on alone for it's the way I'll always be."

He turned on his heel, swung around, and watched her hurry out of the reach of the street lights and into the darkness at the end of the town. He knew what she had really said to him. *Clay, you're a man as good as dead.*

He cruised back down the street and saw the Anchor bunch swarm out of the Two Dance and hit leather at the tie-rail. They galloped out of town, howling, and Ballou stepped up to the walk in front of the jailhouse, determined to make Beckridge listen to reason. He walked into the office and found the sheriff pacing up and down.

Directly he said, "Beckridge, you owe it to your family to get out of Ledsburg. Never mind your own damn foolish pride."

"I'm the law here, Mister! I took an oath to uphold it," the sheriff said. "I run, and what becomes of me? Nothing, I'd be like old Denby over at the stable. And maybe I've got that crazy sickness in me that you gunslingers have! I have to know, too. That's eighty per cent of the reason men face each other in a showdown, isn't it? You ought to know. I saw the old excitement in your eyes when you looked at Paley in the Two Dance, Slade. This business with Paley is none of yours. It is all mine!"

BALLOU abruptly left the sheriff's office and headed for the hotel. Once in his room he stared into the mirror to see if he could see what Beckridge had said was there and what Helen Tenbrook must have seen before she had run away from him. The eyes of his image seemed to hold a question, and they shone too bright in the lamplight. Savagely he assured himself that the urge in him had to do with the dim past and not the present.

His hands shook a little as, turning away from the mirror, he unbuckled the gunbelt and hung it over the back of a chair. He stared at the handle of the Colt, and realized that it held a temptation stronger than he had supposed. He had lived with it too long. That night he found sleep difficult.

It was an hour before noon when he left the hotel. Old Denby was sitting on his wooden box in front of the stable, that one leg of his swinging. It was like a pendulum counting off the days he had left. Ballou passed the Two Dance and saw half a dozen horses at the rack. Men packed the doorway, seeming to be waiting and watching for something.

A puncher came out of the mercantile and yelled, "Get off the street, cowboy! Lead is going to fly!"

Ballou felt it then, a nerve-tingling excitement that ran through the shimmer of dust. Roy Paley came out of the galleried shade a block from the Two Dance and moved into the street with slow measured strides.

He yelled coldly, "Clear out, saddlebum!"

Ballou, his blood heating, pitted all his will against a sudden wild impulse. He said to himself as he cleared the street, it isn't the time. I'm not ready!

A man came out of the areaway between the stable and the Chinese laundry, and Ballou in the doorway of the mercantile, recognized him as the tall

bony man who had worn blue serge the night before. Now he wore a black shirt and a black tie, and boots and dungarees. His gun was low at his hip and tied down, and his profession was in the tilt of his head and in the manner of his walk. He walked within thirty yards of Paley and stopped. Ballou saw Paley's lips curl back over his teeth, and his gold tooth where an eye-tooth should have been, glinted in the sun.

Paley called out, "You came looking for me, Trimmer. Why?"

The tall man laughed and planted his feet. "There is never but one reason is there, Roy? You call yourself 'King.' Lots of other men want to be king. Go for it, Roy!"

Trimmer was lightning fast but Ballou knew the man was dead before he fired his gun. Paley's bullet hit him full in the chest and slammed him back on his heels. His slat of a body appeared to collapse in sections before he spun half around and fell heavily on his face into the dust.

The cold sweat came out on Ballou and he knew that intensity of purpose was not enough to bring the man down. He remembered what men said. It had always been so. No matter how fast a man was with a gun a faster one was waiting just around the corner. Ballou watched Beckridge come out of the Two Dance and kneel down beside Trimmer. The sheriff got up, shaking his head.

"Paley," he said to the gunslinger, 'haven't you had enough blood?"

Roy Paley's deadly glance swung toward Ballou when he gave his answer. "It was Clyde Trimmer's or mine, Beckridge. Leave me alone. It's in my mind that there is another man in Ledsburg gunning for me. I have a sixth sense about ghosts from the past, Sheriff. Slade, let me know when you're ready!"

Clay Ballou kept his hands wide of his hips as he matched Paley's icy stare.

The gunslinger finally laughed, then said, "Let's make it a real show tomorrow night, friend. One this town will remember." He headed for the stable, suddenly pulled his gun and shot splinters out of the box old Denby was sitting on. "Get my bronc, crowbait!" he ordered, and a roar of laughter came from the Two Dance.

Ballou watched the old man hop into the stable as fast as his old legs could carry him and he was both angered and a little sick as he made his way to the restaurant.

Only the bald headed man was in evidence. He gave Ballou a raking glance. "Miss Tenbrook is over at Beckridge's house. Leave her alone!"

Ballou went out. He saw Paley riding out of Ledsburg and he knew the gunman was torn to pieces inside, and resented all men who possessed something he could never hope to attain. A home, a wife, children, and the respect of other men. His envy was a spreading cancer inside him. He had no peace of mind or happiness and he found pleasure in destroying those who had. All these imponderables were all the excuse Paley needed to draw his gun. Paley had mentioned old ghosts and so Ballou was positive the man had killed his father.

A wagon went by, loose wheel-spokes setting up a dry clatter, and Trimmer's boots extended well beyond the tailboard. In a few minutes the man would be buried and soon forgotten. Clay Ballou walked the town. He stopped and spoke to the old man at the stable, caught the strong smell of whisky and turned impatiently away. He held up when he saw Helen Tenbrook coming across the street.

The girl came up to the planks and handed the old man a package. "Some sandwiches," she said, and smiled.

"Ma'am, you're an angel," Denby said.

The girl suddenly turned toward Ballou and vented pent-up emotions against him. "You saw Trimmer die! How brave and heroic do you and Frank Beckridge feel now? You still want your few moments of glory in front of the crowd? After you're dead you won't care about the suffering you leave behind."

"Speak to Beckridge," Ballou said.

"He's the blind, unreasoning one. I believe I would run if I was in his place. I have nothing to lose."

A desperate pleading expression came into the woman's eyes and she was close to crying, but Clay Ballou was walking away and had not seen. He walked to the jailhouse and found Beckridge oiling his gun, and once more he tried to talk sense into the man.

"You have a wife and child, Sheriff. You must be plain crazy."

"I could run, Slade," Beckridge said. "And some day my son would be told about it. Under those conditions I stay and take my chances." He laughed brittly. "You get to that gunslinger first, Slade, and knock him down, and I have no further problems."

Ballou walked out, angry and uncertain.

AT NOON on Friday the tension stretched his nerves taut and he got his horse at the stable and rode out into the hills. When he slipped out of the saddle he looked quickly around and saw the small barkless patch on a jackpine's trunk about fifty feet away. He drew his gun and threw a shot and walked over and saw where the bullet had gone straight and true. He told himself he was fast enough, perhaps faster than Roy Paley and a tremor of anticipation ran through him. The killing would be justifiable, he told himself. It was the collection of a long standing debt. Envy of Paley's talents did not enter into this thing at all.

Just after sundown he was in Ledsburg watching Vird Logan and four Anchor riders come in. One of them was a big-chested man with a heavy-jowled face, wearing a black broadcloth coat and expensive Stetson hat. Ballou knew it was Jim Studer. Ten minutes ago Roy Paley had sauntered into the Two Dance. Ballou casually made his way up the street at six-thirty, his fever burning high. He passed the jailhouse, then swung back. He had glanced into the restaurant for a sign of Helen Tenbrook and had found the place empty save for the bald-headed man. No doubt the girl was with Mrs. Beckridge.

The sheriff was standing in the doorway leading to the two-cell room when Ballou came in, grinding out the stub of a cigarette with his bootheel. Beckridge's gunbelt lay on his desk.

He said, "I'm getting sick of looking at you, Slade!" and came over to his desk.

He was reaching for the gunbelt when Ballou hit him. The blow landed flush and dropped him to the floor and Ballou quickly lifted him by the armpits and dragged him into the cellroom. A few moments later he slammed a barred door shut and hurried out, shoving Beckridge's keys into his pocket.

Out on the walk he had a bad moment of panic, not so much from fear as the sudden realization that he had to know!

Ledsburg, as time ran out for Beckridge, was deathly still. Ballou, feeling the patches of sweat under his knees get cold, passed by the Two Dance and saw Studer sitting in an armchair out in front.

The stage came in just as he was making one more cruise back up the street. When it stopped, Roy Paley came out of the saloon and stood beside Studer. It was five minutes to the deadline. Ballou tried to keep the dead face of his father clear in his mind as he swung wide into the street. That was his justification. His throat was very dry, and he was a little afraid but the great excitement in him was an impelling force. In front of the Two Dance he stopped and threw his glance on Paley.

He called out, his voice strange to him, "Paley, Beckridge won't be here."

The gunman came slowly off the walk, his thick lips curling into a tight smile. "And you intend to do his dying for him, Slade? Like I always ask them. Why?"

"Twelve years ago you and two other skunks shot my father down in Sage City. He was a newspaper man," Ballou said.

Roy Paley shook his head. "If I did it wouldn't matter if I owned up now, would

it, Slade? But I never was in Sage City, and I never rode with two other men. Not even one. I never trusted a soul, Slade. Still want to take me?"

Ballou was convinced that the gunslinger was not lying, and that he was not the man he had been looking for, but he was grimly aware that his urge to try his skill against Paley was too powerful to resist.

He set himself and yelled, "Go for it!" and wondered if a man felt a moment of pain when a .45 slug ripped into his chest.

His gun, he knew was clearing leather as fast as Paley's just as a sudden sharp cracking sound split the numbed silence blanketing the street. Paley turned his startled eyes toward the stable, his knees giving way under him. He twisted his body around, his Colt firing, but a second rifle shot followed the echo of the first through the town and dropped him into the dust. He lay there, his arms flung wide, his sixgun inches from his twitching fingers.

The shock of surprise stilled Ledsburg for a long moment. From somewhere up the street came a woman's sudden burst of laughter, shrill and hysterical.

Ballou looked over at Elwell's and saw old Denby rise up from behind an old feedbox he had apparently placed there to rest a carbine on. He had the rifle hugged close to his chest, and involuntarily Ballou brought the back of his right hand against his dry lips as if to suck at the healing wound a nail had made. And he knew, as the old hostler had said that night, that Paley had failed to consider the things that seemed of no importance, and had lost his life.

Vird Logan was yanking a Winch from his saddle-boot and yelling, "Kill the fool!"

Ballou drew his sixgun and fired, knocking the Anchor foreman's left leg from under him. Full of the feeling of being alive and cured of a dread fever, he roared, "The next man to make a play will be dead!"

Jim Studer, a look of resignation on his porky face, called out, "Anchor, hit leather! Somebody help Vird on his bronc."

Ballou crossed the street to the stable and gave Denby a broad smile of thanks.

The old man said dismally, "An old sidewinder sitting in the sun and only asking for peace and quiet. I'm past eighty and there ain't much left of me to hang, my friend. It just occurred to me that the gunslinger had to be killed."

Ballou glanced over his shoulder and watched men carry the dead gunman away. Paley had been cheated of any dignity or respectability even in death. There had been no heroics. His passing befitted the animal he had become. And now there was no longer a malignant urge in Ballou.

"Clay!" a voice called, and he turned slightly and saw Helen Tenbrook.

Beckridge, a quiet smile on his face, was a few steps behind her. "You saw Paley shoot at Denby yesterday, Ballou. It was self-defense in any court of law." He rubbed his jaw. "I'm obliged, friend."

"He would have killed you, Clay," Helen Tenbrook said, and watched him.

"Most likely," he agreed, and stared at the old man. Suddenly he knew that the manner of Paley's miserable passing would reach far and wide and make other gunmen pause and reflect, for most of them fed on ego and exhibition even to the violent termination of their lives.

Beckridge saw his wife and child across the street. Ballou walked toward the stable entrance and Helen said, "It is suppertime, Clay. You must be hungry."

He grinned ruefully. "I'll be at the restaurant in a few minutes."

The woman shook her head. "Not there, Clay. At home." She looked at him, her shoulders very straight and still, her eyes soft and mildly defiant. "I haven't the pride that makes men do stubborn things and leave women forever lonely, Clay. I'm trying to tell you that you don't have to ride any more."

Ballou, an impulsive man, stepped toward her and took her in his arms.

Old Denby said, "Go on home, you young idiot," and now Ballou knew what had really brought him back to Ledsburg.

A man turned from the stove, and the look of him bewildered Frank

Vengeance Is Mine

By AL STORM

ON FRIDAY, the 17th, a dim light from the west slanted in through an open window of a certain nameless prison. There was the noise of half a hundred men exercising in the yard below, and once, the sharp metallic clack of a guard careless with his rifle barrel. The warden, a solid man with the hard ageless look of a desert scrap rock, turned back from the window.

"You've served your time, Frank. Now you're free, and lucky. Anytime you don't think so, just take a look at those scars on your chest and think how near you came to being buried."

At the extreme edge of the bar of sunlight the man called Frank stood motionless, a thin, dark, savagely repressed figure. Only the flat gray eyes showed life.

"You have a son," the warden said, regarding him carefully now. "Go to him, Frank. Get reacquainted. Start a new life with him and forget what's past."

Frank O'Hearne did not comment. This was a ritual he would have to endure. The same as he'd endured the hospital first, and the cell and the discipline and the long endless nights afterward, it was part of the penalty for being caught off-guard and letting another man get in the

Frank had waited a good many bitter years for this day of reckoning . . .

first shot. Well, he was free now to settle for that, he thought fiercely.

But all he said aloud was, simply, "I am happy to get out, Warden."

The warden began a smile. "I am happy you are out, Frank." Then slowly the smile faded. "Times have changed. It's too bad you couldn't witness the passing of an era, but that's the way things go."

He squinted, regarding the ex-prisoner intently as if troubled by something he couldn't quite make out. Then abruptly he relaxed and presented his hand. "You have a respectable trade now. You are a leather worker and a damn good one. Stick with it . . get yourself a job. Now, any questions?"

Frank O'Hearne stirred. "Is Gus Blamey still alive?"

The warden blinked and settled back. Tiny hard lines sprang up around his mouth.

"Is he?" Frank O'Hearne asked again.

Wordlessly the warden nodded.

Frank O'Hearne stretched then, flexing his shoulders and upper arms as though only now fully feeling his freedom. He said, "Gus Blamey is still around Pahute," and made it more of a statement than a question.

"I shouldn't tell you, but you'd find out anyhow," the warden said, uneasy, talking the way a man walks whose feet hurt or who is uncertain of his footing. "Last I heard Gus Blamey was still sheriff of Pahute."

Frank O'Hearne nodded. "Thank you, Warden." He turned, stepped past the stiff unbending figure of the head guard, and opened the door. The warden called to him:

"Those fifteen years didn't do much good, did they, Frank? You haven't learned anything?"

Frank O'Hearne looked at him. He said, "Not much, Warden," and closed the door.

One week later Frank O'Hearne was forty-two miles due east of Pahute. He climbed from the stagecoach and stood regarding a blunt, dry stub of street that in memory had been long and gay and filled with life. For a moment he was puzzled; he turned and looked up at the stagecoach driver.

"This is Burney?" Frank asked.

"What's left of it," the driver said matter-of-factly. "Fire took most of it eight or ten years ago. Ain't much in this part of the country to keep a town going." He glanced quizzically at Frank O'Hearne. "Are you sure you want to stay?"

"I'll stay," Frank O'Hearne said. The stage plunged away in a smother of dust, next stop Pahute.

Frank located a room in the rear of a barbershop and dropped his cheap straw valise on the bed. The room was close; dust made a film on the one window so thick his fingers left imprints. The edges of the casing were held by thick funnel-shaped webs of long dead spiders. Frank impatiently thrust the window open and leaned out. A long wall interspersed by a single boarded window blocked off the south. Straight east the view was unimpeded until a dun colored knoll cast him off into the sky. To the north there was an interval of one hundred yards of scraggly weeds and then a small stone-adobe hut with a floorless veranda and a wide open door.

Frank drew back inside.

He removed his coat and tossed it onto the bed. He unfastened his shirt. He was sweating and as he unbuttoned his shirt to promote ventilation about his grown-soft body he was reminded of the two scars and looked down at them. Each was now the diameter of a lead pencil, but they had been larger. A .44 caliber bullet makes a larger hole than a lead pencil.

Frank O'Hearne placed his thumb on one, his first finger on the other. They were less than two inches apart. That was shooting. Fast, accurate clever shooting.

But not good enough, Frank O'Hearne thought. I'll show him how to put two in the same hole. When I shoot there won't be any need for a hospital. Just a coroner.

BUT not today, and not tomorrow, Frank O'Hearne knew, for the fifteen years had taken their toll. He had worked with leather in the prison shops. As privilege for good behavior he had been allowed to work at fine intricate carving in his cell, keeping his fingers supple and strong, his hands muscular. But for fifteen years they had not fitted about the butt of a sixgun and Frank O'Hearne knew that the magic would not return overnight. Tomorrow he would begin.

He had supper that night in the back of the saloon, for Burney no longer supported a café. The saloon keeper was a newcomer; he had only been in Burney nine years or so. He was short and dyspeptic, with the drawn cheeks of a chronic worrier. In the old days, Frank O'Hearne thought, he wouldn't have lasted a week.

But the saloonman, whose name was Milo Karnes, was lonely and Frank O'Hearne allowed him to prepare a meal for both of them. They ate at a back table where Karnes could keep hopeful watch on his front door.

"Not like the old days," Karnes mourned. "When I first come to Burney there were four saloons, two cafés, two general stores, and a hotel. Now look at it."

Frank O'Hearne grunted. He said, "I knew Burney when it had nine saloons."

Karnes looked up, startled. "That must have been a long time ago."

"Not so long," Frank O'Hearne said. "Not so long as some might hope."

The saloonman looked at him quizzically but said nothing. Frank O'Hearne finished his fried potatoes and fried beef and leaned back. He stirred a cup of black coffee. The edge of his annoyance passed. He no longer felt the sting of utter helplessness that reminder of those fifteen years always brought. He was free now. He felt an upthrust of anticipation that buoyed him like a drink of strong liquor.

"This whole country was bubbling alive then," he said expansively. "There was a lot doing. Old Purdum had a ranch up north."

"He's still got it," Karnes said interupting.

"Wiley Jorn was king-pin of the rough country over toward Pahute."

"He's been dead nigh onto ten years."

"Gus Blamey was sheriff."

"He's still sheriff." Karnes canted his head wonderingly. "Imagine! All these years and Gus Blamey is still the best man for sheriff in this part of the country."

"Yeah, imagine," Frank O'Hearne said.

Frank O'Hearne left shortly after and walked out onto the street. A slight breeze was picking up from the south and riffling a fine sand across the planks so that they crunched underfoot. He lighted the cigar he had bought at the saloon. The sun was out of sight behind the ridges that thrust up and blocked off Pahute. He studied the sky and the ridges complacently. They were a dull red from the sun, a blood red that has dried slightly and lost its fresh bright shine. The illusion pleased him and he drew deeper on the cigar. Karnes came to his doorway and glanced both ways along the empty road.

"Lonesome damned country, ain't it?" Karnes said, coming up to Frank.

Frank O'Hearne smiled. "If a man minds it." Then, as if in after-thought, he said, "Suppose there'd be any fuss if I was to do some target shooting? I ain't handled a gun in a long time."

Karnes shook his head. "There hasn't been a gun fired around here in a coon's age. Go ahead. Reckon Fenster'd be glad to have the business. He was telling me he ain't sold a cartridge for so long he's scared they'll rust in their boxes."

"Where would I find this Fenster? Down on the corner?"

"Yep. Only place that the windows ain't all busted out." Karnes walked farther from his doorway and turned. He probed at a series of deep erosion-smoothed gouges on the left side of his building.

"Bullet holes," he said archly. "Regular ding-dong battle fought right here one

time. Course, it was before my time," Karnes said ruefully. "Fellow by the name of O'Hearne run onto another outlaw he was feudin' with. They both cut loose and had it out right here."

Frank O'Hearne inspected the marks gravely. "Must have been some marksmen," he observed, "to spatter the wall this way."

"Those are Red Conner's marks," the saloonman said. "Way I heard it, O'Hearne was inside and had just come out. Red Conner cut loose. O'Hearne shot twice and it was all over."

Frank O'Hearne probed a gouge mark with his thumb. He could see that the saloonman expected him to be impressed. He said gravely, "Well, what do you know."

Fenster had cartridges and a showcase of used handguns; he was so overjoyed at prospect of a steady customer he practically followed Frank O'Hearne out into the street in order to show him exactly how to load the short barrel Colt revolver Frank had purchased.

"I can manage, thank you," Frank said pleasantly.

"That's a good gun," Fenster repeated. "Story is it once belonged to an outlaw named O'Hearne that used to be around these parts. He was a regular heller and as bad as Billy the Kid with a sixgun. I reckon he knew guns and if that one was his, it must be a whoppin' good gun."

"It must be," Frank O'Hearne agreed. He looked down at the revolver. He had never seen it before.

But it was a good gun. Frank O'Hearne knew that by the time he had fired a third cartridge. The action was just stiff enough to be due to disuse and not malfunction.

The barrel threw true. He sighted carefully, holding the gun in both hands; he put one bullet through the tin can and four into the sand.

"Not bad," Karnes said, surprised. "With a little practice you'll do even better than that."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Frank O'Hearne said.

IN HIS room, with the door closed, Frank O'Hearne lifted the straw valise to the bed and rummaged to the bottom. He lifted out an ornate piece of leather work which was rolled and tied with soft whang. Unwrapped, the leather piece became a wide soft pouch, looped at the top for affixing to a belt, nubbed at the bottom for whang leather to whip about a thigh and fasten it in place. The leather was clean, faintly oiled. Frank O'Hearne removed two whalebone strips from his pocket and worked them as ribs into the back of the pouch. Now the soft leather had shape. It needed but the first feel of steel to establish its identity as a gun holster.

Fastening the leather to his belt, the whangs to his leg, Frank saw how snugly yet gently the leather shaped about the steel. A year ago—no, it was fifteen—he would have been ashamed of the intricate scroll work, the fragile limbed deer bounding over the windfall, the tree bordered spring with its flow and its cattails. He ran his fingers over the designs recalling the endless hours of toil, the intense patience with which he had fashioned and embrossed this masterpiece of leather work. He wasn't ashamed now. All those hours he had dreamed of how he would use it, and where, and anticipation had leaped through him like a searing flame. His fingers had trembled so that he had been forced to wait until their trembling slackened.

He wouldn't have to wait now. Just a few more days . . .

It's a gift, he had explained to the warden when he'd asked about the leather object. And a gift it would be. Abruptly he wheeled, his hand dipped, splatted hard against the revolver butt, and came up clicking. He was nearly ready, he thought. There had been three clicks squeezed off so rapidly they sounded almost as one. He reached up and touched the scars on his chest. Suddenly his hand was dipping again. He whirled, knees bent, the empty gun extended and clicking, clicking.

"If you would like to ride a horse,"

Milo Karnes said, on the third day, "I think Fenster would loan you his. You don't get much exercise staying in your room all day."

Frank O'Hearne glanced up in surprise. "I would like that," he said. He had been practising his draw in his room until it was as good as it would ever be. What he needed now was a chance to draw and fire. He said, "Isn't Fenster afraid I'll steal the horse?"

Milo Karnes laughed briefly, as though the thought was so out of reason as to be ridiculous. "We haven't had any horse stealing around here in a long time. Guess we got our sheriff to thank for that."

"Yes," Frank O'Hearne said dryly. "Gus Blamey can be thanked for a lot of things."

"Best sheriff this country ever saw," Milo Karnes stated emphatically. "Best shot, quickest on the draw, best —"

Frank O'Hearne stood up. "You should have made him president!" he said bluntly. "It's stingy to keep a man that good all to yourself!"

Milo Karnes looked startled, and Frank O'Hearne strode outside and crossed the empty street to stand beside a warped shell of building that Mami VanHorn had once made the pleasantest place in town. He had about cracked it and the knowledge made him angry. He had waited fifteen years; he could wait another week or two. Then, when he was ready, they would see who was the smartest and the most accurate and the fastest with a gun.

He saw the saloonman in his doorway looking up and down the empty road. He did not want to talk anymore with the man. Not for a while. Turning toward Fenster's, he held his thinking to this chance to ride out into the hills where he would be able to practice firing the instant his gun muzzle cleared the upper lip of his holster. The end of those fifteen years seemed awfully close now.

Eight days later he rode to Pahute. Pahute hadn't grown much, but unlike Burney, it hadn't slid backward until it was nothing but a lifeless rind preserving shape only because nothing pressed against it. He rode Fenster's horse across the log bridge spanning a dry wash and turned into main street. The flame he had held surpressed began licking through him. The fifteen years faded away and it was as though Frank O'Hearne, who had rated fast as Billy the Kid, again was on the prowl.

The livery barn stood where it always had. He could pick out the general stores, the saloons, the corner bank. He prodded his tired horse down the direct center of the street half expecting some acquaintance to call to him from the shaded walk edge, but none did.

Unexpectedly the thought came to him that Jimmy might be somewhere around. He had received the one letter telling of Martha's death and of the neighbors caring for the lad. Savagely he thrust the thought away.

He knew no one and none knew him and this would have its advantage, he thought coldly. He would be able to ride out of town without every passerby and chance rider knowing immediately who he was and watching the direction he had gone. Savoring this knowledge, Frank O'Hearne smiled fleetingly. Unless some oldtimer chanced to see him, he was secure.

HE CAME to a corner and hesitated, debating whether to accede to a desire to see the rest of the town or whether to turn left here and get it over with. It came to him then that he wasn't quite certain where to go; he did not want any blundering now. This would be even, man to man, without advantage or chance upsetting the balance and giving one man the edge.

A youth rounded the corner whistling, heading for home and for supper. Frank kneed his mount toward the walk which extended back as far as the alley.

"Could you tell me where Gus Blamey lives?" he asked the youth.

"Sure. Straight ahead until you come to that big cottonwood tree, then swing south. There's a path. You can't miss it."

Frank O'Hearne nodded. "Thanks." He

jogged the tired horse into motion.

Gus Blamey lived in a low square adobe house. Light showed faintly at one window and marked a door braced wide to allow a soft evening breeze to enter. Frank could see a shadow of someone moving about the kitchen. He watched it for a time before dismounting.

Anybody but me would stand back here and knock him off with a rifle, he thought placidly. Blamey must be awfully confident to move about like that with the door open.

He strode toward the low veranda and raised and eased-down the Colt revolver strapped low to his right thigh.

At the edge of the veranda he paused. Gus Glamey didn't have a wife, he remembered; he'd lost her even before . . . maybe he had married again. Frank considered this briefly and discarded it as not being likely. No, Blamey was in all probability alone. Lifting the Colt one final time, Frank let it sag gently into the fancy holster and stepped onto the veranda. Another step took him to the braced open door.

"Gus Blamey!" he called softly. "I'm ready! Can you beat me now?"

A man turned from the stove and looked at him, and Frank had a moment of bewilderment. This man's hair was mostly white. He limped. His shoulders sagged. The faded shirt was draped loosely over a thin sunken chest, but there was no question. It was Gus Blamey.

"You must be Frank O'Hearne," Blamey said quietly. "Come on in, Frank. The warden wrote me you'd probably be out this way."

Something was missing, something vital, something that could give meaning and reason to this whole affair. Frank O'Hearne mechanically took one step inside the kitchen. He forced his arm to relax above the fancy new holster. Gus Blamey saw the gun and for a long moment his gaze held.

"You always were a prideful one, Frank," he said finally. "My but that's a good looking holster."

Frank did not move. Did not speak. The long run of those fifteen prison years stretched before him, the years of scheming and dreaming and waiting. All the bitter hating.

"If it wasn't that I caught you off-stride and out of balance I'd probably never have nailed you that time in front of the bank," Gus Blamey said. "I'm glad that I didn't kill you though, Frank."

Frank stared. He had hated and dreamed until the hatred had become a habit and he had lived only for the day when he would show the world who was the faster man with a gun. Now he was here . . . and Gus Blamey was an old man.

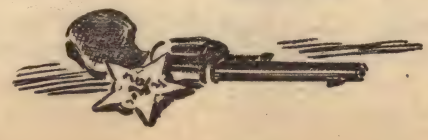
"What'd be the good of killing you now?" Frank cried, bewildered. "What would it prove?"

Gus Blamey glanced about the kitchen as if in search of something physical with which to prove a point. "Fifteen years added to a man barely twenty don't change him too much. But me, I was already over forty —" He looked at the ex-outlaw and shook his head. "That's the way life goes, Frank." His eyes strayed down the lean dark figure. "That sure is a pretty holster."

"A gift," Frank said absently, mechacally. And then the hatred that had proven a sere and withered thing suddenly no longer could repress him. "For my son, for Jimmy," he said, and added quickly, fervently, stepping more fully into the kitchen, "How is he, Gus? How often do you see him? What is my boy like?"

Gus Blamey smiled. "We'll go find him, Frank, just as soon as you've had a cup of coffee. It's good to see somebody from the old days."

He reached into the cupboard for another cup.



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They tried to fit him with the same old rustling frame, but found he had grown

A RUSTLER REBELS

YOUNG Joe Seely returned to the Sun Prairie Range, after serving three years in the Montana State Prison for cattle stealing, and rode straight to the Gentry place on Telegraph Creek. He quickly outlined his plan for vengeance to the taciturn Gentry brothers. Exchanging smoldering glances, the brothers nodded, saddled up, turned out their scrawny stock, and followed Joe back to his two-by-four spread that bordered the Missouri Breaks.

Joe and his new partners worked hard and fast, and slept lightly. Their time was spent fixing up the neglected log cabin, the horse shed, and pole corrals of the

By CARL D. SCHMECKEL

small ranch which had once meant so much in the dreams of Joe Seely and Libby Bracken. Joe went about his preparations with a grim sort of resolve that was not lost on the still-lipped Gentry brothers. Three years in the State Pen had hardened and tempered Joe Seely.

At daybreak of the third day, Hugh and Art Gentry saddled up and rode away into the Northwest. Joe watched them disappear toward the dim, broken outline of the Little Rocky Mountains. His hard, gray eyes glinted. The two brothers had been instructed to return within four days —come hell or high water.

Next, Tad, the button, headed northward alone, while Joe remained behind to hold down the ranch. Joe felt no qualms about the mission upon which he had sent the youngster. Gun for gun, the youngest Gentry was a match for any man in the county.

Late the following morning Joe heard the sounds of approaching horses. He ceased work at the corrals, watched a group of riders come on rapidly. Easing his sixgun in its holster, he waited with a grim smile tugging at the corners of his straight lips. As his visitors paused a few yards away, Joe sent his hard glance sliding over each man in turn.

Old Wade Bracken, grizzled owner of the huge Rocking B iron, sat his saddle with a back as straight as a ramrod. He stared down at Joe Seely as though he were observing a sidewinder which had just crawled into view. Siding the ranch-owner, a husky younger man, with an arrogant face, eyed Joe with open contempt. Mort Wescot, bullying ramrod of Wade Bracken's Rocking B, had always envied Joe's ability to make time with pretty Libby Bracken.

The more Libby had avoided her father's foreman, the more intense had Wescot's passions become—until the enmity between himself and young Joe Seely had become common gossip on the range. Knowing Wescot, most folks had given odds against easy-going Joe Seely. And three years ago they had proven themselves right. Only it hadn't changed a thing for Libby Bracken. She had continued to resist all advances from Mort Wescot.

Now Joe Seely sized up the five gun-hung riders who backed Bracken and his foreman. He remembered how Bracken had always bragged that he didn't hire ordinary cowpunchers. The riders of the Rocking B had to be the best the country afforded. These were alert-looking, quick-eyed men.

Old Wade Bracken spewed tobacco juice into the dust near Joe Seely's boots. His agate-hard blue eyes were hostile.

"Folks here at Sun Prairie are fed up with your kind, Seely. You ain't wanted on this range. I hear tell you and the Gentry clan teamed up. That ain't for long—either for you, or the Gentrys."

Joe waited a moment. Then he said flatly, "If you're through, Bracken, ride out. And ride fast before I get fed up myself."

Mort Wescot cursed, and Wade Bracken's seamed face suddenly showed anger.

The old man said warningly, "Seely, you're not stealing any more stock on Sun Prairie Range. You're through here, finished. There's a check made out to you for a thousand dollars, waiting at the bank at the county seat. You go there, sign over this ranch, and then get out. I'll wait two days—no longer."

His face immobile, Joe Seely carefully eased his stance, and his holstered sixgun moved menacingly on his right thigh.

"Go to hell, Bracken," Joe said clearly. "I've come back to stay, and no addle-pated range hog is going to scare me off. Not ever."

WADE BRACKEN choked. The old man's hands jerked from the saddle horn, but Joe Seely drew before anyone else could make a play. He centered his sixgun muzzle on Wade Bracken's chest. His move had been so unexpected, that he had caught every man napping. Mort Wescot cursed steadily in a tight voice, his right hand poised above his gun butt.

"Pull out of here before I signal my men to burn powder," Joe said, his

voice strong.

Carefully keeping their hands in sight, several riders in the rear of the group started swerving their mounts.

"Wait!" Bracken's voice crackled. "I say this jailbird's bluffing. He ain't got the guts to squeeze that trigger." The old man's order suspended all movement.

For a long moment Joe Seely stared steadily into Bracken's hot eyes. "Don't push your luck, Bracken," he warned softly. "Your being Libby's father don't mean a thing now."

"Boss, he's lying about the Gentry's being around," Mort Wescot broke in angrily. "I've had some boys watching this place. Hugh and Art Gentry pulled out of here a couple of days ago. And yesterday that young rattler, Tad, followed his brothers. Reckon this sidewinder is too weak-bellied for real bad snakes."

Bracken's voice held a deadly quality. "Every man draw real slow and cover Seely. If he gets jumpy, blast him down." Wade Bracken's hand dipped slowly to his holster and started up with his weapon. "I aim to show you the real color of a cow thief's belly."

Joe Seely waited while sweat popped out on his sunburned face. One twitch of his trigger finger, and Libby Bracken's father would be dead on his horse. His finger curled, and a hissing sound issued from his throat. Joe Seely stood like a man carved from stone. Then he sighed, and lowered his gun as a battery of weapons covered him. Mort Wescot's scornful laugh broke the stillness.

"Yeah," Wescot said. "A real weak-bellied snake!"

Slowly Joe Seely loosened his grasp on the gun and let it drop. He didn't change expression. Just stared full at Wade Bracken like a man in a trance.

"All right, boys," Bracken ordered grimly, "look in the cabin and the shed. If you run onto a Gentry, don't waste time arguing. Looks like we been too long cleaning out that rattler's nest down on Telegraph Creek."

Four of Bracken's men dismounted and scattered. Within minutes they returned, shaking their heads.

Wescot smirked triumphantly.

Old Wade Bracken eyed his foreman, his anger still running rampant. Suddenly his seasoned face creased in a thin-lipped smile.

"Mort, we're going to teach this cow thief a lesson. Maybe when we're through, he'll be aching to listen to reason." The old man turned to meet Joe Seely's steady gaze. "Get down, Mort, and beat the hell out of him."

Grinning widely, Mort Wescot dismounted. He unbuckled his gunbelt, hung it over his saddle horn. Flexing his burly shoulders, he minced forward in his high-heeled boots. There was an expression of unadulterated joy on the foreman's face. His slitted eyes held a merciless purpose in their depths. No man on Sun Prairie Range had ever stood up long under Mort Wescot's battering fists. And if ever a man loved such a reputation, that man was Mort Wescot.

Joe Seely studied the bigger man, and a tremor of hatred ran through him. Even if Mort Wescot had been acting under orders, the man was just as guilty of having framed Joe Seely on that cattle rustling charge as was the old tyrant who sat his saddle, grimly observing them now.

Suddenly Wescot exploded with a right-handed blow aimed at Joe's chin. Joe swayed, grasped the big man's arm as it shot harmlessly over his shoulder. He crouched in a swift reversal, heaved mightily, and Mort Wescot's flailing body pinwheeled over Joe's head. The foreman landed flat in the dust with a whoosh and a surprised grunt.

A roar of rage issued from Wescot's throat. He sprang to his feet like an enraged cat, and his long, looping left hand found Joe's head. Joe swayed under the terrific impact of the punch. A paralyzing blow landed in Joe's midrift, and he dimly heard the excited yells of Bracken's cowpunchers. Joe slid under a fist aimed at his head, countered with a right cross to Wescot's stomach. The big man grunted

with pain, grasped Joe's shirt, and they smashed to the ground in a flurry of gouging fists and elbows.

JUST for an instant Joe saw a face staring at him from the group of riders. Libby Bracken! Vision or truth, it was enough to remind Joe of the way in which Mort Wescot had always patronized Libby, trying to scare off any man who would venture to win her favor besides himself. Angry strength streamed through his muscles. Wescot took a series of Joe's hard chopping blows as they scrambled. He tried to roll free. Joe rolled with him, tough knuckles working at the big man's bloody face.

A hard fist almost tore Joe's head loose from his shoulders. He grabbed the arm, the dust of the corral boiling into his face. Joe choked and spat. Then with a mighty wrench he twisted the arm against its owner's shoulder blade. A pained curse spewed from Wescot's mouth. He struggled to unseat Joe from his back, flopped around on his stomach like a crippled lizard. Joe's bruised face was bare inches from Wescot's contorted features.

"Damn you, Seely," Wescot fumed, humiliation forcing the words from him. "You'll never get this lucky again before I kill you."

The hot sun beat down upon them, causing dirty rivulets of sweat to streak the red on their grimy faces. Then suddenly Joe thrust himself away from his antagonist, rose warily to his feet. Wescot came up in a rush, his baleful face transformed by what he considered an unexpected break.

"Don't move, any of you."

Shock ran through Joe Seely's body at the timber of that voice. Mort Wescot straightened slowly and dropped his huge hands. Then both men turned.

Libby Bracken sat a sorrel horse behind her father's riders. A rifle lay snuggly in her gloved hands. And its bore weaved to cover the men. Her set, white face promised no good to the man foolish enough to doubt her seriousness. Old Wade Bracken's face filled with consternation as he surveyed his only daughter.

"Libby, put down that rifle," the old man called to her. "This is one time you—"

"Be quiet, Dad." The impetuous girl favored her father with a stare that made Wade Bracken flinch. His face paled, and he sputtered.

"I've always believed, Dad, that you were a pretty special sort of man," Libby Bracken continued. "I'd no idea that you would ever stoop to the level of men like —like your egotistical foreman."

"Libby girl, listen to me!" Wade Bracken looked desperate. "You don't understand what this man—"

"I understand enough." The girl's denunciation of her father held every man spell-bound. "Take your whipped foreman, and your other mob-minded help, and get the hell off this ranch."

Libby Bracken's vehement order blanched her father's face. Dumbly he turned, nodded to his men. Mort Wescot limped to his horse, mounted, and they rode out. They didn't look back. Joe Seely felt something almost like sympathy for old Wade Bracken. No longer ramrod straight on his horse, the girl's father rode as though his saddle galled him.

For a long moment Joe Seely feasted his starved eyes on Libby Bracken. How much of his emotion registered on his face he didn't know; but suddenly the girl's pale face flushed a rose pink. She fumbled her rifle back into its saddle scabbard, cast a quick glance at the coulee that had swallowed her father and his men. Then she turned again to lock glances with Joe Seely.

"You never wrote once, while you were away." Libby Bracken didn't say it accusingly. She said it without emotion, as though something inside her had died.

"I wrote twice, Libby," Joe said. "If you didn't get the letters—" He shrugged. "When you didn't answer, I just waited."

The girl shuddered. She said, "It's all hard to believe about Dad." Suddenly her blue eyes flamed. "I wish you'd broken Mort Wescot's neck! It's all his doing.

Somehow, he seems to gain influence with Dad no matter how openly I show my distaste for him."

Joe Seely's heart quickened. Libby Bracken still loved him! It was there for him to read upon her face. She, too, had waited. And now, once more, he was going to hurt this girl. He cringed at the thought. But gradually the inner strength he needed seeped back again, and he straightened grimly.

He loved Libby Bracken—and in the eyes of her obstinate father he was a common cow thief. The thought brought doubt: old Wade Bracken had seemed too set on Joe's guilt, not at all the attitude of a man who might have had a hand in framing Joe. But now, the die was cast. It had been cast, ever since Joe enlisted the Gentrys and gave them their orders. The showdown was near, and it would find Joe Seely waiting.

Joe said quietly, "Libby I'm going to ask you to go home now. Trust me a little longer. I'm not a thief. Something is awful wrong about all this. Your Dad—me, it's badly mixed. I'm asking you to do this Libby."

The girl bit her lips. For an agonizing moment Joe thought that she would cry. Then she drew a deep shuddering breath, and lifted her eyes. She tried to speak, but no sound passed her constricted throat. Quickly she wheeled the sorrel and spurred away at a dead run. His heart in his mouth, Joe watched the reckless girl slam the sorrel from view into the mouth of the coulee in the wake of her father and his men.

LATE that same afternoon the coulee trail disgorged two more riders. Hugh and Art Gentry were covered with dust and grime from their grueling ride. They unsaddled and cared for their horses, all the while holding to a deep silence. Joe Seely's flesh crawled with impatience, but he managed to restrain himself until the brothers had eaten a hurried meal.

Afterwards, sitting on the front stoop, the two Gentrys gave Joe a terse resumé of their trip. Joe Seely's eyes glowed with a consuming fire as he listened.

Long after dark the sounds of horsemen came again. Joe Seely, Hugh and Art Gentry challenged the riders at the corrals, then lowered their rifles when they recognized the duo. Minutes later, Joe and the others followed young Tad Gentry and his prisoner into the cabin. Joe relighted the smoky lamp, while Art checked the sacking that covered the windows. Hugh grunted and went back out into the night. Joe surveyed the prisoner silently. His answer was a glaring rebuke.

"I always knew the Gentrys would overstep the law some day," Sheriff Hank Clorey husked. "But I figured you all wrong, Seely. Once, I even thought your conviction for rustling smelled bad. But you ain't worth a tinker's damn."

A hard smile twisted Joe's lips. "Maybe not, Hank. We don't aim to harm you, just figure to hold you a spell."

The lawman's black eyes snapped in the yellow lamplight. "Is that the reason you sent this trigger-happy kid clear to the county seat to kidnap a sheriff? You might at that, while you and the Gentrys clean out some trusting fool's herd. An, if you get caught, you got me to trade on?"

Joe Seely looked at the Gentry brothers. It was the first time that he had ever seen them smile. . . .

During the next two days, Joe Seely and the Gentry boys stuck close to the ranchyard, keeping a vigilant eye on Sheriff Hank Clorey in the cabin. Joe chafed with impatience. The nights were the worst. Each night after dark, Joe and the Gentrys split forces. Tad guarded the sheriff in the cabin, Joe bunked wakefully in the horse shed, and Hugh and Art Gentry slept or skulked somewhere nearby in the sagebrush.

Joe Seely knew that he was gambling for high stakes, and he had no way of telling just what turn coming events might take. He was certain of only one thing: the people who had framed him three years before now seemed to have a fine

opportunity to do so again. Even the daylight hours stretched endlessly, an eternity of tense waiting.

Then, morning again, and a rider broke recklessly from the coulee trail with a pounding of flying hoofs. Joe stared hungrily as Libby Bracken slid from her winded horse in the yard. She was hatless, and her white face was taut with alarm.

"Joe." Words crowded from her throat. "They're coming, Joe! Dad, and Mort Wescot, with a deputy and a posse. They're coming after you."

Joe Seely reached out and grasped the shaking girl by the shoulders. "Easy, take it easy, Libby! How far are they behind you?"

Libby Bracken jerked through his grasp and clung to him. Her voice was muffled against his chest. "Maybe a few miles, Joe. They'll be here soon!"

The girl stiffened and her head came up. "You've got to run. Call your men and head for the Breaks. They'll never find you in the coulees."

Joe shook his head. "We haven't got anything to run from, Libby."

"But Dad says that you and the Gentrys—"

"I know. They say we broke the law. Right? But we didn't, Libby. It's like that other time, three years ago, all over again," Joe's voice lifted urgently. "Step up on that horse and scoot quick, girl. This won't be any place—"

Abruptly, she ducked under his arm, raced for the cabin. At the door she turned for a quick backward glance. Her voice carried to him plainly. "This time, Joe Seely, I'm staying where I belong!" Then she disappeared within.

A great surge of joy welled through Joe Seely as he posted his men, and settled down to await the inevitable. It was not long in coming.

JOE SEELY counted eleven men in the group of riders that scattered at the mouth of the coulee trail, and then cautiously converged on the ranchyard. As they drew near his post in the horse shed, he recognized Wade Bracken, Mort Wescot, several of the Rocking B cowpunchers, and—his heart rose—bulky Biff Tucker: Sheriff Hank Clorey's chief deputy.

The horsemen drew together and stopped at the edge of the yard as though halted by the same rein. They surveyed the quiet surroundings, then edged slowly forward again. Once more they stopped. This time Biff Tucker stood in his stirrups. The deputy held a rifle loosely in his hands; and his hoarse voice filled the silence.

"Seely! Joe Seely. Can you hear me?"

Joe allowed the silence to stretch thinly while he checked the action of his rifle. Then he stepped warily from the open end of the horse shed.

"What do you want here, Tucker?" Joe's voice carried plainly across the yard. He stood watchfully in the dust, his rifle cradled over his left arm.

"We want you, Seely." Mort Wescot's vicious tones shattered the brief quiet. "And them sneaking jackals you been trailing with since you came back!"

"Shut up!" Wade Bracken's voice was sharp.

Biff Tucker cleared his throat noisily. "I've got a warrant for your arrest, Seely. Also for Hugh, Art, and Tad Gentry. The charge is cattle stealing. I've got men to swear in court, and we found some of that stock you drove down through the Gentry place. You haven't got a leg to stand on."

"Who makes these charges, Tucker?" Joe's voice sliced through the sunlight like a knife.

"I do," barked Wade Bracken. "I told you to get out, Seely. Now you stole your last cow with the Rocking B brand on it!"

"Did you see me and the Gentrys steal your cows, Bracken?" Joe asked calmly.

"No, dammit! But I didn't need to. Mort, here, and three of the boys saw you, and trailed you. They—"

"Just like three years ago, eh, Bracken?" Joe reminded.

"A cow thief never learns."

"What're we waiting for, Tucker?" Wescot's voice was edgy with angry. "Go take him. Me and the boys will take a look—"

"Stay put, all of you." Joe had twisted slightly, and now his rifle barrel bore directly on the posse. "There're three other long guns centered on your guts." He smiled grimly. "We've been waiting for you."

Biff Tucker rose straight in his saddle. "You drop that rifle, Seely. Being wanted for cattle stealing ain't as bad as being wanted for murder. Or being dead."

"Tad!" Joe's call whipped across the yard. "Bring out the witness!"

The eyes of the posse turned as one man as the door of the log cabin slowly swung open. A figure took shape in the shade of the stoop. Then Sheriff Hank Clorey stepped into the sunlit yard. His badge gleamed brightly upon his shirt.

Joe could hear the gasps of the possemen clearly in the pregnant silence. Biff Tucker was the first to find his voice.

"Clorey! You all right?"

"I been snug as a bug in a rug." Sheriff Clorey's outburst was a release for all his pent-up feelings. Then he cooled suddenly. "Like Joe Seely told you, we've been waiting. Now I know for what!"

Mort Wescot was quietly backing his mount. Three or four other men in the rear of the group appeared at the point of taking flight. A shout from their rear halted them. Hugh and Art Gentry, rifles at the ready, stood spread-legged.

Sheriff Hank Clorey's hand was on his gun butt. "When were those cattle stolen, Wescot? I want the time."

Mort Wescot sat speechless.

"Yesterday, at daybreak," Wade Bracken shouted. "What the hell's going on around here? My men saw them take the cows. What more proof do you want?"

"A lot more, Bracken!" Sheriff Hank Clorey yelled. "Three years ago, Mort Wescot and some of your men swore they saw Joe Seely fooling around where some cows were stolen. Joe had no alibi, and he was convicted. Now we got about the same thing again. Only this time, they swear they saw him do it. I say they framed the whole thing themselves. Because I been with Seely and the Gentrys every minute of the past two days!"

Wade Bracken and his men sat immobile. Then suddenly Wescot spoke.

"It's all a damn lie," he yelled.

"It's the truth—the kind of a frame that sent me to the Pen, Wescot!" Joe Seely's hard tones pushed away Wescot's denial. "A few days ago I sent two of the Gentry boys beyond the Little Rockies to check on information that I'd picked up on the prison grapevine. In the same prison where you served time for rustling, Wescot! They found your brother's ranch, and some worked brands from the Rocking B stock you and your brothers stole three years ago. They found—"

Wescot caught the posse by surprise. He drove spurs into his mount, and the animal shot across the yard toward Joe Seely before anyone could act. He brought up his sixgun.

"I should've done this job right three years ago."

Wescot's gun exploded a gasp after the sharp crack of Joe Seely's rifle snapped off the foreman's frenzied yell. The horse continued its rush across the yard, jarred to a sudden stop at the corrals. Its dead rider sailed over its head to slam meatily against the corral poles. Then Mort Wescot flopped into a limp heap in the dust.

Joe Seely stared down at the dead man, and only dimly did he hear the voices of Sheriff Clorey and Deputy Tucker as they took command of the situation. Then a slender figure rushed from the cabin, straight into Joe's arms. Libby Bracken's muffled sobbing brought a lump to Joe's throat as Wade Bracken placed a hesitant hand upon his daughter's shoulder.

Joe glanced quickly away, to where the Gentry brothers leaned against the horse shed. Almost as one, they nodded.

"I—I've been an old fool, Seely." Wade Bracken seemed to have aged years. "There's nothing I can say."

Impulsively Joe Seely reached out to grasp Wade Bracken's gnarled fingers. They locked glances for a long moment.

"Well, Dad?" Libby's voice trembled. "Who's going to marry Joe? You or me?"

Old Wade Bracken joined in the chuckle that rose to Joe Seely's lips.

The two men showed in the firelight, and Brock said softly, "This way, gents!"

DEATH AT STANDING ROCK

By

ERIC ALLEN

• • •

Brock had trailed the men for a week, and just as he got within killing distance of them, up popped this woman, needing help

HE HAD trailed them southward for seven days, following their erratic course from the rim of the Mogollon Basin to the middle of the Santa Cruz. Now, halting at an isolated sheep camp near the San Simon River, Brock Stanton asked the Mexican herder if two riders had passed that way.

"Madre de Dios!" the Mexican said fervently. "Passing here is not all those *bandidos* have done, Señor!"

The Mexican was garrulous in the telling of it, pacing the scorched earth of his camping place and gesturing with expressive hands. The two men had ridden into his camp an hour ago, desperate for food and water and out of smokes. Their manners had been disarming; especially the smile of the handsome one. The Mexican had felt compassion for them because of their weariness and their hunger.

"I fix them a lavish meal, Señor, and they eat like their bellies have no bottoms! Then they get up and stick those vicious pistols in my face and take all of my provisions! The supply wagon will not come here from Ysleta until tomorrow, and those hombres do not even have the mercy to leave me smokes!"

Brock looked quietly around at the Mexican's camp, conscious of his own gnawing hunger. Then his gray eyes lifted, searching the barren red-rock mountains to the south.

"They go that way," the Mexican said, nodding vigorously. "Perhaps they will camp tonight in this canyon of the Standing Rock. You will find pockets of water in the river for your horse."

Brock gave the Mexican enough tobacco to keep him in smokes the rest of that day and night, thanked him and rode on. The Mexican was probably right, he thought. The men he pursued would camp in the mountains, having plenty of food and water now. They might even get lazy and careless, Brock thought, and forget to watch their backtrail.

He reached the San Simon River at sundown and found most of its bed dry as a powder mill. Hoofmarks of their horses were visible here, though roughing out quickly on deltas of drifted sand. A sheep trail led Brock to a sunken pocket of water, where he let his horse drink sparingly. He reined up the southern shore of the river then, and faced a garish world of red-rock cliffs and sentinel buttes cut in half by a narrow canyon.

But that canyon was too handy a place for ambush, if the men he was trailing had spotted him. Brock sent his tired horse climbing leftward, and reached the rim of the canyon before dark.

He dismounted and crouched at the edge of rimrocks, his glance sweeping the twilit canyon floor. He was surprised to see the canvas-covered wagon pulled up in a patch of greasewood. At the same instant he saw the two riders. They were halted in front of the wagon, talking to someone out of sight under the canvas top.

One of the riders, the handsome one, kept talking rapidly and smiling, his white teeth flashing in the twilight. Then, reluctantly, both men reined their horses around and rode up-canyon, turning often in their saddles to look back.

Brock watched them intently, wondering at the reluctant way they had left the wagon. Then, glancing at the wagon again, he suddenly saw the woman. His wonder vanished, leaving his face tight and stilled.

"Make it two offenses, boys!" he muttered grimly, and stood up. "Neither of you can die but once, even if you make it three!"

The woman had stepped from the covered wagon and stood by the dashboard now, watching the riders leave. A small boy came out behind her, his bare feet resting on the wagon tongue as he reached to clutch her dress. He was a fair-haired child, quick as a monkey. The woman turned impulsively, lifting the child and hugging him close. Then she thrust him quickly back under the canvas cover and stood looking at the two riders again. Even from this distance, her attitude of unease got across to Brock.

He watched the two men approach a bend in the canyon, the sacks of provisions they had stolen from the Mexican jiggling on their saddles. They were still looking back at the woman; and the handsome one rose in his stirrups abruptly and waved. They vanished then, and Brock stood listening until the sound of their horses faded out.

Brock's gray eyes narrowed and darkened. They wouldn't go far, he thought; not if that woman was staying in that parked wagon in the canyon, alone with the child.

HE LOOKED toward the wagon and saw the woman stooping to build a fire. The dim oval of the child's face was barely visible in the opening of the canvas-topped wagon. Brock's curiosity about them intensified. What were they doing here, in the middle of the Santa Cruz desert, miles from the nearest set-

tlement? Then the campfire's flame took hold, reminding him again of his nagging hunger. He hadn't tasted food since dawn. He mounted determinedly and backtracked in the approaching darkness, reaching the mouth of the canyon at last and turning up its course. He might purchase food from the woman, and satisfy his curiosity about her at the same time.

He could ride up-canyon later, and spot the fire of the two men he was after. Then tomorrow he would take them, bracing them in the bright light of morning where there would be no tricky shadows to thwart his relentless gun.

He let his horse approach the wagon at a steady walk, and halted it at the edge of the circle of firelight. The woman was kneeling, turning meat in an open skillet. She stood up suddenly and turned to stare.

"Who is it?"

There was fear in her voice. Brock sensed it. Yet there wasn't too much of it. She stood with her body thrown slightly in profile against the campfire, her face indistinct, turned straight toward him. She was a tall woman; taller than she had looked from the rim of the canyon. She was slim of waist, full-breasted and young.

"Pardon me, ma'am," Brock said quietly, "Is your husband around?"

"Yes," the woman replied.

"I'd like to have a word with him."

"My husband is sick," she said. "He's resting in the wagon."

Brock waited a moment, glancing down at the skillet of cooking meat. "I wonder if I could buy some food?"

A weak voice from the wagon said softly, "Get out of that saddle, mister! Step up here in the light!"

"Jim!" The woman's voice was constricted. "Jim, don't—"

"It's all right, Julie," the voice from the wagon said. "No one's going to get hurt. Quick, now, Mister!"

The muzzle of the shotgun lay dead-centered upon Brock, resting across the dashboard of the wagon. The face of the man behind it was barely visible, like a cadaverous death's-head peering through a veil of uncertain light. Brock lifted his hands shoulder high and came to earth lightly, walking close to the fire and halting.

"Now," the man said, "answer some questions. Are you with those men who just left here"

"No."

"What are you doing here?"

Brock Stanton didn't hestiate. There could be no harm in telling them, not after he had dogged those men this close. "I've been trailing those men for seven days," he said. "Today has been the worst one. I'd like to buy some food."

"Who are those men?" The man in the wagon demanded. "What have they done?"

Brock hesitated, and saw the muzzle of the shotgun lift, and turned to catch the full impact of the woman's intense watchful eyes. He faced the man squarely then and answered, his tones scraping the rough edge of anger, cutting the story short.

"What kind of girl was she?" the man asked curiously. "Some poor homesteader's daughter?"

"No." Brock's voice was flat. "Her father owns one of the biggest sheep ranches in that country."

"You mean those two men just waylaid her on the trail and attacked her?"

Brock nodded.

"Didn't a posse try to take them?" the man queried.

"Half-heartedly, yes," Brock answered. "But sheepers aren't too well thought of in that country, fellow. That posse was made up mostly of cowmen. They didn't try hard enough."

"So you're a hired gunman then," the man said bluntly. "Her father paid you to chase those two men down."

Brock's face tightened. "No."

"Are you a sheriff, then, or a deputy?"

Brock said thinly, "Look, fellow, you ask a lot of questions. Let me ask one for a change. What are you people doing here, or is that any of my business?"

The muzzle of the shotgun lowered. "It

might be," the man said resignedly. "What's your name?"

"Brock Stanton."

"I'm Jim Burchfield." The man came weakly upright on the wagon's spring-seat, pulling the fair-haired youngster into sight. "This is my son, Tykie." Then he nodded toward the woman. "That's Julie, my wife."

BROCK took off his hat and turned toward her. She stepped close and offered her hand. Her fingers felt strangely cold as he touched them, and he gripped them briefly and felt their trembling. She's scared, he thought, and looked at her intently. But here close up with the firelight softening the even planes of her face, he saw that it was not fear. It was something vague and elusive, hard to grasp, yet growing as he watched her until he was certain of what it was. Her face was quiet, intriguing; and that nervousness in her was a result of her quick, almost acute awareness of him that showed plainly in her eyes.

"I'll put more food on the fire," she said abruptly, and turned from him.

Burchfield said from the wagon, "Take a seat on that keg there, Stanton. You look tired."

Brock sat down reluctantly, vaguely upset by what he'd glimpsed in the woman's eyes. He was suddenly conscious also of Burchfield's sunken, feverish eyes resting upon him.

"So you thought that posse didn't try hard enough?" Burchfield said wonderingly. "You just took it upon yourself to right that wrong?" He coughed; a hollow, racking sound that made his thin frame shudder. "Do you intend to kill those men?"

"I hadn't planned on taking them back with me."

"Are you a married man?" Burchfield asked.

"No."

"Betrothed?"

Brock shook his head impatiently, then forced a smile. "Why don't you answer my question now?" he retaliated. "What are you folks doing here?"

Jim Burchfield's eyes dropped slowly, throwing his dark, introspective glance along the sagging tongue of the wagon and down to the canyon floor. A strange unease slipped through Brock as he watched him. Burchfield's eyes were brooding, somber; the stark, hopeless eyes of a man already contemplating an insensate dwelling place beneath the turf.

"We're from Indiana," Burchfield answered at last. "My uncle found a rich silver claim out here, and sent word for us to come and help him work it. Unfortunately, Uncle George was a man much given to drink and celebration. Just before we reached Ysleta, where he intended to meet us, he had celebrated one time too many. He died suddenly after a four days' drunk."

Brock smelled the aroma of the cooked meat as Julie Burchfield moved past him. She knelt, forking meat onto plates she had placed on a clean cloth on the sandstone canyon floor. She glanced at Brock as she stood up and went to the wagon.

"Hand me the bucket, Jim. I'll get fresh water for Mr. Stanton to wash in." When Brock stood up quickly she waved him down. "You talk to Jim," she said, and disappeared in the darkness along the canyon wall.

"Uncle George had made a will to me," Burchfield went on slowly. "He had left a description of the claim, and we came out here and found it. But the biggest drawback has been my health. People say this country will either kill or cure a man with consumption, and I took the chance. But I'm dying." He lifted a hand to his sunken chest. "I feel it here."

Brock glanced into the darkness where the woman had gone. His throat felt dry. "If you think that, fellow, why don't you get your family out of here?"

"I like it here," Burchfield said. "So does my wife and child."

"They can't work a silver claim, though, Burchfield. You know that."

Burchfield didn't answer. His somber glance touched Brock and moved beyond him in a disconcerting way, as if some

vision had suddenly lifted there in the outer darkness. Almost absently, his thin hand began to stroke his son's fair hair.

"We like it here, Stanton," he repeated dreamily. "This country is big, inspiring, strengthening. I want my son to grow up here. I've asked God to let me live to side him; to watch the wonder in his eyes when the sun comes up big in the mornings; to feel the same rough wind that touches his cheek touching mine! But I don't think God has willed it so."

His voice trailed off, and for a moment there was no sound except the snap and crackle of the campfire and the soft sough of the canyon wind. There was a feeling in that wind, Brock thought; the feeling of life and hope and fulfillment, all jumbled up with Burchfield's preoccupation with impending death.

JULIE BURCHFIELD returned quietly to the firelight. "You can wash up now," she told Brock, and poured water into a galvanized pan.

She held the pan out to him as he stood up, and when he took it from her he felt the nervousness again running through her hands. He looked at her wonderingly, strangely drawn to her and filled with a mounting compassion. A tightness gripped his vitals; and later, sitting cross-legged before the food, he was astonished that his ravenous appetite had fled. He ate, but his heart wasn't in it.

She carried food to the wagon, but Burchfield declined it. "I've got to lie down again, Julie," he said. She brought the child back and knelt by the spread food, eating and feeding the youngster.

Brock rose and reached for his hat. "Thanks," he said. "I haven't tasted such food in weeks." He smiled. "Not since I stayed in a Flagstaff Hotel with a Kansas City meat packer, and he furnished the trimmings and footed the bills."

She looked up at him steadily for an instant, then her glance dropped and fastened upon his sagging gun. She said quickly, "There's a good place for you to sleep, here close in a niche of the canyon. We've got a lot there where we keep our horses. We have feed if you want to feed your horse."

"Thanks," Brock said, "but I'd better drift up-canyon and see where those two men camped."

She stood up. "They told me they'd be camped a half mile or so from here. Told me I could come and borrow some of their provisions, any time I wished. They said they'd be here for several days."

Brock's eyes darkened with the lift of cold, consuming anger. Yes, he thought, those men would do this the easy way if Julie Burchfield would go to their camp. They would stay in the canyon and wait, anticipating her coming. They would dream of her tonight, and squirm on their blankets.

He pulled his hat down tight against his scalp and glanced toward the wagon, thinking of Jim Burchfield, sick unto death and still holding a dream of this country where he wanted to raise his son. Brock looked at the youngster, standing on sturdy legs now, grasping a fold of his mother's calico skirt. The boy was looking up at Brock with rapt, attentive eyes, his small mouth open. Brock started to turn away.

"You can build a fire there," Julie Burchfield said hastily. "No one could possibly see it, unless they're on the rim of the canyon. That niche in the canyon wall is secluded."

Was it fear that was crowding her now, Brock wondered? Was she afraid to stay at the wagon with a sick husband and her son as long as those two men were in the canyon?

"All right," he said. "I'll spread my bedroll there, if I'm not imposing."

She took the child hurriedly up in her arms and went to the wagon. "Watch him, Jim," she said. "Mr. Stanton will stay all night." She motioned for Brock, and he took up the trailing reins of his horse and followed her into the shadows.

"In there," she said at last, halting and pointing. "I'll have breakfast for you early." She turned quickly and was gone.

Brock led his horse into the spacious niche and found a lot holding two gaunt work animals. He unsaddled his horse and fed it oats from a small steel drum, then spread out his bedroll. Sleep was far from him, though night's deep darkness intensified, bringing its mounting chill. He hadn't meant to build a fire, but the seclusion of the place set his mind at rest. Presently he had a small blaze going.

He rolled and lighted a cigarette and sat with his booted feet outstretched, one elbow supporting his upper weight against the swell of his saddle; a long loose man with a slightly aquiline face and deep gray eyes that caught the fire's reflection.

Thoughts of the Burchfield family laid their implacable weight across his mind. Was it courage, he wondered, that was making Burchfield doggedly remain here when he knew he was dying? Or had the pressure of sickness warped his mind? Vague resentment at this family's unexpected encroachment touched Brock briefly. Things had been neatly mapped in his mind before he met them; things forming a clear-etched picture framed by the gilt hardness of certainty.

He would face the two men and tell them what he wanted them for, and they would die under his flaming gun. He would ride back to the Mogollon country then, and resume his job, and that would be all there was to it—except that he had met the Burchfields. He had met them, and their troubles had somehow shifted to his shoulders, because he knew he could never forget them. He couldn't forget them because something deeper than compassion had washed through him when he looked at Julie Burchfield. Conscious admission of that thought slightly shamed him, as if he were treading on forbidden ground—but there it was.

BROCK was rolling a second smoke when the sound of footsteps reached him. Instinct made him slide his long body backward out of the firelight. He stood up.

"It's me," Julie Burchfield said, and stepped to the fire and halted.

Brock looked at her and waited for some sign of excitement to show on her face; something that would warn him that those men had slipped back to the wagon; something that would show she had been alarmed. But none of these things showed on her face. He saw only a strange, quiet intentness that held him stilled.

"I just came to visit, Mr. Stanton," she said uncertainly. "If you don't mind."

Brock moved back into the full glow of firelight and gestured to his bedroll. "Sit down."

She did so with a flawless grace, drawing her legs sideward under her skirt. She had changed from the worn calico dress to a fresh one that had a dark-blue luster in the firelight, the frills of the bodice barely touching the base of her slender throat.

"It's about those men, Mr. Stanton," she said. "Jim and I had a long talk, and we both think it's foolish for you to go against those men alone. There are officers of the law in Ysleta. You should get the proper authorities."

Brock finished rolling his cigarette and held a match to it. He stood looking impassively at her across the match's flame.

"Don't you agree?" she asked, when he didn't answer.

"No."

She looked up at him in disbelief. "Do you actually intend to shoot them, and leave them where they fall? Do you aim to ride back home then, to wherever you came from, smug in the thought that justice is done?"

"I doubt if I'll feel smug about it, ma'am," Brock said quietly. "But I'll know that they paid up, and they won't ever be able to do a thing like that again."

She stood up suddenly. Even from where he stood, Brock could see the rapid pulsebeat in her throat, and could hear the constricted sound of her breathing.

"I can't believe you're a killer!" she said. "And neither can Jim! It's just something both of us felt about you. Jim

said you must be a good man, or you would have been placid like the members of that posse, and would never have started out to right that wrong, alone. But I don't think you're a killer! You're a straightforward man with a dead-set purpose, but you're shouldering something that belongs in the hands of the law."

Brock stared at her without answering. He took a deep drag from the cigarette and flipped its remainder into the fire.

"Besides," she said, pressing her point, "you might be killed! And life is precious, Mr. Stanton. No one could feel that any stronger than I do. My husband is dying, I've been watching him die slowly for months."

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Won't you ride to Ysleta," she said, "and bring a posse back here?"

"No." Brock's voice was hard. "I don't intend to give them another chance to commit a crime, nor a chance to cross the Border."

"They won't cross the border, Brock—Mr. Stanton. At least not for several days. They have provisions, and they told me they would stay. It's twenty miles to Ysleta. You can take one of our fresh horses, they're not riding stock, really, but they're sturdy. You can have the law back here by daylight."

Brock's face was tight, implacable. "You go back to the wagon," he said. "Don't worry. I'll take care of this thing in my own way."

Still she didn't go. Why was she standing there like that, so still and intense and waiting, as if the very closeness of her would have the power to persuade him?

"Mr. Stanton," she queried suddenly, "were you in love with that sheepman's daughter?"

The question hit him with its solid impact. He absorbed the shock of it, and

[Turn Page]

ADVERTISEMENT

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let it dwindle inside him. "Maybe I was—once," he answered bluntly.

"Did you intend to marry her?"

He smiled bleakly. "I reckon it never came to that."

"Why not?"

Brock hesitated, looking at her and vaguely wondering why it was so easy to talk to her now. "Well, for one thing, I'm a cowman, foreman of a cattle ranch, and she is a sheepman's daughter. But that's only one thing. There's almost open warfare there between cowmen and sheepmen now, and for a good many years I've carried a reputation for a fast gun. She couldn't stand the pressure of gossip, and she couldn't wait until we got things ironed out. She broke things off because she was too sensitive and willful. That's about all."

Julie took a step closer to him. She made a gesture with a quick slender hand. "Then if she deliberately ended things between you, you're not obligated to kill those men who wronged her. That job belongs to the law."

Brock shook his head. "I think I would have followed those men even if I had never known her. I think that posse would have, too, if they hadn't been cowmen, and involved in a bitter war with sheepers." He straightened resolutely and his voice grew harsh. "There's something in this thing that most cowmen haven't thought about. Some of those cowmen, maybe the big ones, will be accused of bringing those thugs into the country and encouraging them to commit an outrage against a sheepman's daughter. What do you think the Government men will think about such talk, if they're forced to step into this trouble between cowmen and sheepers?"

"Is that partly the reason you're after those men, Brock?"

Brock said grimly, "Somebody has got to stop them. That's all. I think I'm the man that can do it."

Julie Burchfield's shoulders drooped slightly. "Yes, Brock," she said, "I guess you are. I suppose you could do almost anything you set your mind to."

SHE started to turn away, then paused, looking at him with a slow appraisal, the outline of her body under the blue dress silhouetted against the firelight. Brock reached for the makings of a cigarette, and was suddenly very conscious of her nearness and of all of his surroundings. He heard the whisper of a night-hawk's wings overhead, and the snicking of dry greasewood branches under the stroke of the canyon wind.

The same look of awareness he'd noticed back there at the wagon was in her dark glance now, and he was man enough and sensitive enough to recognize it for what it was. What would it be like, he wondered, for a woman like her, young and alive and full-bodied, to live for months with a man slowly dying; a man too pathetically weak to stand?

She turned away and he watched her vanish, her slender shoulders squared and her face uplifted. She would be true to her husband, Brock thought; neither cheapness nor deceit was in her. But there was a desperate need for a strong man.

Another thought worked through his mind suddenly, tightening his stomach. What if he *didn't* get both of those men he was after? What if something happened; a misjudgment in timing; a freakish draw from one of them that would more than match the speed of his own gun! Jim Burchfield couldn't protect his wife. Had she thought of that? Was she afraid that Brock would be no match for those men.

Unease grew upon Brock Stanton; a weakening of his resolve and his certainty. Did he have this right, to face those two men alone, and take the chance of failing when the welfare of Julie Burchfield's family was at stake? That was the way of a woman, he thought bitterly; sowing doubts in a man's mind, undermining his certainty.

But her face was there in the heart of his campfire, quiet, watchful. He mulled things over as the minutes dragged. Those men would hang, he admitted to himself, if they could be captured and taken before an impartial jury. He made his decision at last.

He left the niche in the canyon wall and walked with long strides toward the Burchfield wagon. Their fire had dwindled to ashes, but a candle was lighted under the wagon's canvas top. Brock halted near the front opening and said softly, "Burchfield."

Jim Burchfield coughed and thrust his pale face outside the wagon. "Yes? That you, Stanton? What do you want?"

"Will you use that shotgun, Burchfield, if either of those men come back here?"

"Yes."

"Good. I've decided to use one of your horses, and ride tonight after a posse."

"I'm glad to hear that, Stanton."

Brock turned and started away.

"Stanton."

Brock turned back.

"There's something else you can think about while you ride," Jim Burchfield said. "Julie told me about that sheep and cattle feud. If you don't want any more of that after this thing is over, I can use a reliable man to work that silver claim."

"I'm a cowman, Burchfield."

Burchfield nodded. "You can think it over, though. And another thing I want to say, Stanton. I'm sorry, about you caring once for that sheepman's daughter, sorry you didn't make a go of it. A good man needs a good woman, Stanton. Someone helpful and loyal and tenacious and planning, as only a good woman can be."

Brock nodded brusquely without answering and strode back to the niche in the canyon wall. He caught one of Burchfield's horses and saddled quickly, thrusting his rifle down snugly into its boot. An urgency was crowding him now, so strongly it was hard for him to retain clear thought. And yet as he mounted, a still small voice rose like a muted echo of warning inside his brain. You're being sidetracked, Stanton. Sidetracked because of sympathy for a woman and a small boy and a man dying of consumption.

Julie Burchfield's voice called to him softly as he rode past the wagon. He halted the horse and saw her materialize out of the darkness. "Here's water,

[Turn Page]

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Brock," she said. "And a package of biscuits and dried beef."

She handed up the package and a small canteen and waited while Brock tied them to his saddle.

"Thanks," he said, and straightened. "I'll try to be back by daylight."

"I'm glad, Brock," she said, and stepped back as he rode down-canyon.

HE CAME out of the canyon's mouth and faced the open desert, with the erratic course of the San Simon River showing like a thin knifeslash under the starlit sky. His reluctance was mounting by the time he reached the river's sandy shore. It was a dead-weight inside him, that reluctance; a gradual downfall of spirit, a sickening of his soul. It grew so strong, he brought the horse to a sudden deadstand. He turned in his saddle, looking back toward the canyon. Is it cowardice, he thought, that is making me start after that posse?

He was sitting that way when he heard the gunshot. The surprise of it and the muted rebound of echoes from the canyon froze him in his saddle. That wasn't a rifle or pistol, he thought. He remembered Jim Burchfield's shotgun.

He was wheeling the awkward horse and spurring toward the mouth of the canyon when a crackling of other shots broke out. Those shots faded, then came the thin, broken scream of a woman. His goaded mount plunged into the mouth of the canyon then, and Brock's gun was in his hand.

Then the rashness of the thing he was doing struck him. He heaved on the reins, bringing the horse he bestrode to a shuddering standstill. He left the saddle, realizing that the Burchfield wagon was just around the bend in the canyon ahead. He started running, his bootsoles scuffing lightly, the blood pounding in his throat. He halted at last, and suddenly heard a man's strident curse and the sound of footsteps.

"Link!" a man called harshly. "Where'd that woman go to?"

"She's somewhere close," a voice in the darkness answered. "She grabbed the kid and beat it."

"Don't you run out on me, damn you! We'll find her together, Link!"

Brock heard the sound of a taunting laugh. "Don't get worked up, handsome! Get a brush fire going. That'll light this place."

Brock waited, the butt of his gun pressed solidly against the heel of his hand as he cocked it.

A match flared golden in the darkness ahead, revealing the form of a man stooping over. Then a blaze caught hold and lifted, its red tongue lapping up the darkness. Brock saw the two men plainly then, standing glaring heatedly at each other across the flame.

The pent-up thing that was in Brock Stanton exploded. His long stride took him forward.

"This way, gents!" he said softly. He halted, and shot the handsome one twice as he turned.

The other was fast—incredibly so—writhing sideward and drawing and firing. But his shot was frantic and wild, and death flicked at him before he triggered the second. The third shot from Brock's gun had struck the man's middle. He sagged, then his face lifted with its look of horror. Moved by a touch of mercy, Brock shot him between the eyes.

Brock straightened with the smell of burned powder in his nostrils; and the light from the fire they'd built lay harsh and bright and revealing against his face. He holstered his gun and went toward the wagon. A gleam of metal on the earth by the sagging tongue caught his glance as he halted. He touched the shotgun barrel with the tip of a boot, and lifted his eyes across the wagon's dashboard and saw the body of Jim Burchfield.

"Brock!"

He wheeled to see Julie stumbling toward him. He met her and caught her shoulders, straightening her as she sagged. His voice was tight with a dry constriction. "Where's the boy?"

"Out there where you camped," she

whispered. "Oh, Brock, forgive me for being a fool! They slipped back here on foot, only minutes after you'd gone! I'd just put out the candle. They didn't say anything, didn't give any warning. They just crowded through the front of the wagon like brutes and I didn't know what was happening until Jim was struggling with them. I grabbed Tykie and jumped out the back and ran. "Is Jim dead?"

"Yes. He died fighting, like the man I figured he was."

He released her and she sank down weakly on the wagon tongue. She lifted her eyes once to glance across the wagon's dashboard, and suddenly she was crying.

Brock climbed into the wagon and straightened Jim Burchfield's body, covering it with a sheet. He came down again and said quietly, "I'll see about the boy."

"He's all right, Brock." Julie lifted her face, her voice strained and unsteady. "I stood him up in the oat drum and told him to stay until I got back. I wish you'd stay here a minute, Brock."

"All right." He felt the need for some words, and struggled for them and finally found them. "I'll stay with you, Julie—you and Tykie both—as long as you like."

And suddenly other words came back to him; the words of Jim Burchfield, rising almost like an audible sound on the wings of the canyon wind: "A man needs a good woman, Stanton."

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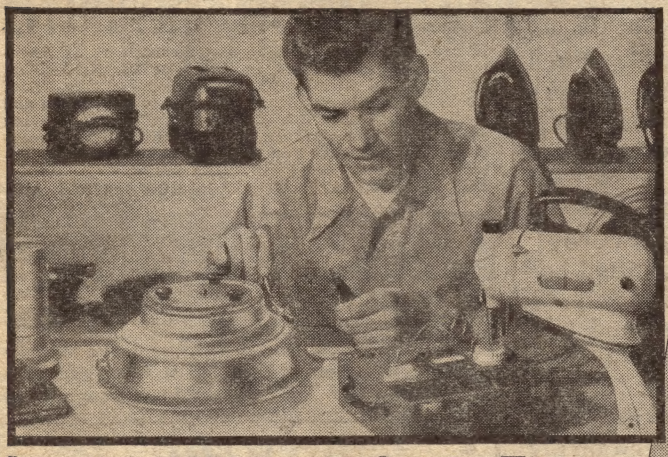

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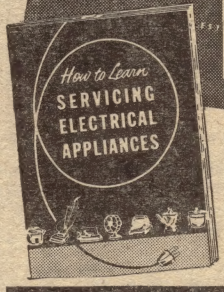

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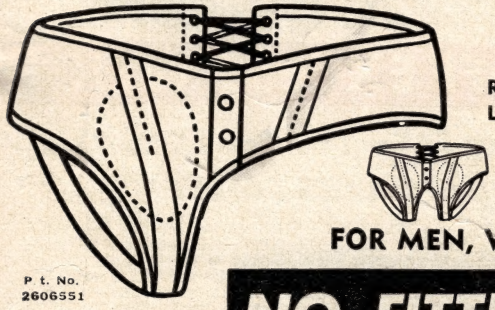

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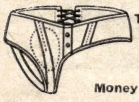

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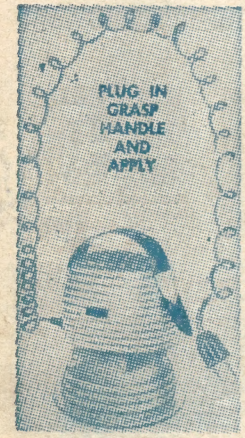

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